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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

**BODIES OF POPULAR POWER: TERRITORIAL ACTIVISM AND
GRASSROOTS CONTROL IN ARGENTINA**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

POLITICS

with a designated emphasis in LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO STUDIES

by

Steven G. Araujo

June 2017

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GLOSSARY OF SPANISH TERMS AND ACRONYMS

AGTCAP or *Asociación Gremial de Trabajadores Cooperativas Autogestionadas y*

Precarizados – Union Association of Cooperative Self-managed and
Casualized Workers

Autogestión – Grassroots control or self-management

Bachillerato popular – Popular high school

Barrio - Neighborhood

Barrio Bonaerense – Neighborhood Bonaerense [social program]

Cartonera/o – Those who scrape by going through the trash and finding items to
recycle.

Casera/o – Steward or Caretaker

CEBs or *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* – Ecclesiastical Base Communities

COB La Brecha or *Corriente de Organizaciones de Base La Brecha* – Current of
Base Organizations “La Brecha”

Comisión de Género – Gender Commission

Compañera/o – Comrade

Compañeros de base – Comrades at the base

Conurbano Bonaerense – The ring of cities that surround Buenos Aires to the north,
west and south. Also known as the Greater Metropolitan Buenos Aires.

ERTs – *Empresas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores* – Worker-Recuperated
Enterprises

FAL or *Fondo de Acumulación Logística* – Logistical Accumulation Fund

Inscripción territorial – Territorial inscription

Jardín Popular – Popular Kindergarten

Mate – A popular drink, similar to tea, in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.

Mercadería – Food staples

Militante – Activist

Milongueña – Monthly parties hosted by IMPA's cultural center and popular high school.

MNER or *Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas* – National Movement of Recuperated Enterprises

MNFRT or *Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores* – National Movement of Worker-Recuperated Factories

MTD – *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados* – Movement of Unemployed Workers

MTNS or *Movimiento de Trabajadores Norberto Salto* – Movement of Workers Norberto Salto

PAT or *Programa Argentina Trabaja* – Argentina Works Program

Patria chiquitita – Little homeland

Patria Metalúrgica – Metalurgical homeland

Piquetes – Roadblocks

Piqueteros – Unemployed Workers' Movements

PJ or *Partido Justicialista* – Peronist Party

Planes sociales – Social programs

Pomos – aluminum tubes

PTA or *Programa de Trabajo Autogestivo* – Program of Self-managed Work

Pueblo – People, as in “the people” or community.

Reivindicativo – Demand-oriented

Taller de Aguas – Water Workshop

Trabajo territorial complejo – Complex territorial work/activism

UCR or *Unión Cívica Radical* – Radical Political Party

Unidades básicas – Community centers of the Peronist Party

Veredas Limpias – Clean Sidewalks Program [social program]

ABSTRACT

Bodies of Popular Power: Territorial Activism and Grassroots Control in Argentina

Steven Araujo

Bodies of Popular Power examines how two place-based social movements actively produce spaces of resistance to challenge neoliberal fragmentation. The first is a worker-recuperated enterprise and the second is an unemployed workers' movement, both of which can trace their origins to the Latin American neoliberal hegemony of the late 1990s. Based on eighteen months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork, I analyze the production of space and the role of *autogestión* (grassroots control) in each of these sites. Rather than limiting my analysis to how movements struggle within space, I show how these movements have actively produced new geographies in their struggle against neoliberalism. In this way, I put the central ontological tenet of the spatial turn, that space is not only a container of social relations but also a product of them, back at the center of the analysis. The inclusion of the local concept *autogestión* allows for a critical interrogation of the movement practices that strive to develop democratic subjectivities and build popular power. While there is an extensive literature, predominantly in Spanish, on each of these separate movements, few studies actually analyze them together. In the instances in which these movements are taken together, they are usually understood as examples of "horizontalism" or "autonomism." This work often borrows from political theorists from the Global North who endorse autonomy and resistance at the global level. I contend this analysis conceals the place-based strategies and characteristics of these movements as well as the way in which they engage in an agonistic, hegemonic struggle within civil society but also with and against the state. Theorizing these movement practices as the spatial politics of *autogestión*, I make a unique contribution to the spatial turn and theories of radical politics while resisting the fetishization of autonomy or "autonomous spaces" that characterizes much of the recent work on social movements, especially in Latin America.

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I have to add that it impossible to think about getting this degree without thinking about the fact that my parents were two undocumented, working-class immigrants from Argentina. What makes the story even more incredible is that my sister, Mariam Araujo, ten years my senior, was also able to earn a PhD in Psychology from the University of California, Berkeley. We were the first generation to go to college in our family and now we both have PhDs. We both know the work it took for our entire family to get to this point. I remember one moment in particular when my sister would help my parents at their bakery on University Avenue in Seattle while I would sit in the back watching TV or taking naps on the shelves.

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For my mother, Elsa Araujo.
And my late father, Alberto Araujo.

Introduction

Resistance to neoliberalism in the past twenty years has produced a new constellation of concepts and practices on the left that have inspired and animated resistance movements all over the world. Beginning with the Zapatista uprising of 1994, at the height of neoliberal globalization, and continuing into the 2000s with the alternative globalization movement, we have seen the emergence of a new set of ideas revolving around autonomy, self-management, horizontalism and space or territory. What was new was not so much the concepts themselves but their prominence and emphasis in what appeared to be a revolutionary strategy with a different approach to state power. As opposed to the revolutions of the twentieth century that took state power, often through centralized and hierarchical military or guerrilla structures, the new movements appeared to avoid the question of state power. In fact, they appeared to have a simultaneously local and transnational focus that sidestepped the national scale altogether. This very rooted and yet dispersed characteristic made these movements appear to be everywhere (Notes, 2013). Indeed, this was part of their appeal for many activists and scholars.

While the Zapatistas appeared as the “vanguard,” it was not long before social movements in Argentina, made visible to the world by the popular revolt of 2001 that overthrew the president, were declared an example of “urban Zapatismo.”¹ Different practices in a different context appeared to be animated by the same political

¹ These are the words of John Holloway from the prologue and back cover of Raúl Zibechi’s *Genealogía de la Revuelta* (2003).

impulses. The popular revolt itself, and the movements that led to it and followed it, were theorized and analyzed as a part of this new constellation. The uprising, which overthrew the government of Fernando de la Rúa and three subsequent presidents in the span of weeks, was understood as a revolt that did not seek to take state power, while new movements such as neighborhood or popular assemblies, popular barter networks, unemployed workers' or *piquetero* movements and worker-recuperated enterprises (*empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores*, ERTs) appeared to provide a bottom-up alternative to state power. These movements were often theorized as bastions of autonomy, horizontalism and self-management, along with the popular uprising itself, which often figured centrally in these tropes about new political organizing models.²

Given the short life of the neighborhood or popular assemblies and other forms of collective action following the uprising, it was the *piquetero* movement and the occupied factories that became the representatives of this new way of doing politics. From a distance, it was easy to group these movements. Both of these movements displayed very visible forms of disobedience. Factory workers challenged private property laws by occupying their own factories, in many instances after they had already been closed down (Fajn, 2003; Rebón, 2007; Ruggeri 2009a). In a further violation of the law, they started up the machines and began to produce once again, but this time without bosses and without owners. The *piqueteros* were

² For example, see (Chatterton, 2005; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2006; Dinerstein, 2015; Monteagudo, 2010; Sitrin, 2006; 2012; Sitrin & Azzelini, 2014; Zibechi, 2003; 2008).

equally disobedient. Organized into large movements, they made themselves visible by forming roadblocks (*piquetes*) on large highways, their flaming tires, face masks, and large wooden sticks becoming symbols of their militancy (Cerruti & Grimson, 2004; Maneiro, 2012; Svampa & Pereyra, 2009). Although on a different scale, the *piqueteros* also appeared to be engaging in their own forms of production. Soup kitchens, popular kindergartens and other forms of cooperative self-management began to appear in the neighborhoods where these movements were based.

The view from within, however, does not allow for such simple categorizations. The self-understanding of the protagonists of each movement are significantly different. For the workers who took over their factories, it was the threat of unemployment that pushed them to put their bodies on the line. For these workers, the unemployed person, the *cartonero* (person who scrapes by recycling),³ and the *piquetero*, occupied a position that was unacceptable and even unimaginable, which they often referred to as “the abyss.” The abyss, for them, was to be beyond middle age and unemployed in Argentina during the crisis. The *piqueteros*, then, were by no means a form of inspiration. Rather, they were the excluded, the marginalized, those who inhabited the abyss.⁴ Thus, the movements that had been exemplary forms of resistance to neoliberal globalization for the global left were actually separated by the

³ The *cartonero*, which is derived from “*carton*” (cardboard) are those who go through the trash looking for recyclable items, which they take to recycling centers in exchange for a small payment. Their appearance during the economic crisis signaled a new level of visibility of extreme poverty in Argentina, which historically has had very low levels of unemployment.

⁴ Carlos Forment (2016) quotes a worker from an ERT who says “Anyone who is jobless is treated like garbage; look at the Piqueteros” (148).

ways that they thought about themselves. Real or imaginary, this “abyss” represented the different structural positions of these two types of workers and their subjective experience of that position.

The factory workers understood unemployment as a form of exclusion and non-existence, but for the *piqueteros*, who insisted on identifying as unemployed workers, their structural position was not necessarily the disempowering experience that others imagined it to be. In fact, the persistence of the *piquetero* identity and the pride in having a long history of fighting for the rights of unemployed workers demonstrates exactly the opposite. Thus, while one could say that these movements are separated by an abyss, one could also say that it is the abyss itself that connects these movements. Both movements, then, despite their different structural position and their subjective experience of that position, are evidence of excluded, marginal groups fighting for recognition as workers. It is clear that the factory workers have earned more national legitimacy through their struggle,⁵ but regardless of these different interpretations, both have shown the capacity to resist the threat of exclusion and make something out of nothing.

Territorial Activism and Grassroots Control

This study is based on an in-depth analysis of a worker-recuperated enterprise known as IMPA (*Industrias Metalúrgicas y Plásticas Argentina*) and an unemployed workers’ movement known as the FOL (*Frente de Organizaciones en Lucha*), both of

⁵ In 2010 Cristina Kirchner famously claimed that Argentina itself was a “giant recuperated factory” (Rebón et. al., 2016: 38).

which can trace their origins to the Latin American neoliberal hegemony of the late 1990s. In my analysis, which is based eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork and deep engagement with the work of Argentine scholars, I highlight their unique forms of territorial activism and the role of *autogestión* (grassroots control) as a means of challenging neoliberal fragmentation. While there is an extensive Spanish language literature on each of these separate movements,⁶ there are few studies that analyze them together. In the instances in which these movements are taken together, they are usually understood as examples of “horizontalism” or “autonomism” (Dinerstein, 2015; Sitrin, 2006; 2012; Zibechi, 2003; 2008). Such work often borrows from different political theorists from the Global North who endorse “autonomy” and resistance at the global level. I contend that by understanding these movements as part of a horizontal and global form of resistance to neoliberalism or capitalism, these analyses conceal the place-based strategies and characteristics of these movements as well as the way in which they engage in an agonistic, hegemonic struggle within civil society but also with and against the state. The novelty of the *piqueteros* and the ERTs, as well as what has allowed them to endure, has been their ability to organize the territory while employing a form of grassroots control that does not require complete autonomy from the state.

It was in the field that I discovered that horizontalism and autonomism were at best, vague signposts, and at worst, gross exaggerations. After experiencing the

⁶ On the worker-recuperated enterprises see (Magnani, 2003; Rebón, 2007; Ruggeri, 2009a; 2009b). On the *piqueteros* see (Cerruti & Grimson, 2004; Maneiro, 2012; Pereyra et. al., 2008; Quirós, 2008; Svampa, 2009).

initial disorientation of discovering that these movements did not identify with these terms, I began to put together the pieces again but in a different way. First, I realized that each of these movements was producing a space of resistance in its own unique way. The activists of the FOL talk explicitly about “complex territorial work” as they build elaborate cultural centers and engage in other forms of spatial politics in popular neighborhoods. I analyze this at length in chapter five. IMPA also engages in a form of spatial politics that is less explicit but in some ways more obvious: the imposing building that used to house over a thousand workers now only has forty-seven, but it has devoted many of its “empty spaces” to community projects such as a cultural center and a popular high school. I analyze this as the “production of a subversive geography” in chapter three.

Secondly, I found that the concept of *autogestión*, which local activists and scholars use to describe these projects has many clear advantages over “autonomy,” “horizontalism” or other overstated terms. I define *autogestión* as a participatory form of organization that is based in struggle and hostile towards the state.⁷ Further, I see *autogestión* as a practice that strives to develop democratic subjectivities and build popular power. As I found in my discussions with activists, the concept of *autogestión* had a unique plasticity that made it especially useful for describing political projects in the real world, with all of their tensions and contradictions. The term implies a degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency, but, importantly, it cannot be reduced to these concepts. A project that is connected with the state, even funded by

⁷ I deal more extensively with this term further in chapter one.

the state, can still be self-managed (*autogestionado*). In chapter four I discuss at length, how the FOL acquires state resources without participating in clientelist networks. This connection to the state is also important with regard to the popular high schools at IMPA (chapter three) or in the FOL (chapter five). Further, *autogestión* implies a bottom-up form of organization, but it is far more plastic in this sense than terms like horizontalism or even radical democracy. *Autogestión* has room for leaders, administrators, and complex social dynamics. However, the imprecision of the term can be one of its downfalls. I give this special treatment in my exploration of the social relations of production at IMPA in chapter two.

Theories of Radical Politics

This focus on territory and *autogestión* or what I call the spatial politics of *autogestión* in chapter one, is an important difference from the way that these movements have been understood by other activist and academic scholars dating back to the popular uprising of 2001. This event, which came on the heels of important alter-globalization protests in Seattle and Washington DC, gained global attention and attracted a range of observers from outside Argentina interested in learning from the latest forms of resistance in what they understood as a global movement. These scholars produced work emphasizing the autonomist and horizontal nature of the new movements in Argentina. This applied to many forms of collective action, from the uprising itself, to the worker-recuperated enterprises, the unemployed workers' movements as well as more short-lived forms of action such as the neighborhood or popular assemblies and local barter clubs (Chatterton, 2005; Chatterton & Pickerill,

2006; Dinerstein, 2002; Lewis, 2004; Monteagudo, 2010; Negri et. al., 2003; Sitrin, 2006). This perspective was not entirely a foreign construct. Many local scholars echoed the claim that social movements in Argentina represented a new, horizontal and prefigurative approach (Colectivo Situaciones, 2002; Flores, 2005; Lavaca Collective, 2007; MTD Solano & Colectivo Situaciones, 2002; Thwaites Rey, 2004; Zibechi, 2003). Many of these authors, whether they were from Argentina or some part of the Global North, were influenced by a branch of Marxist thought known as autonomist Marxism that had been recently been popularized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) and John Holloway (2002). Through their theorization of autonomist Marxism, these authors were able to create a strand of Marxism more compatible with anarchism, which had also enjoyed a resurgence with the rise of the alter-globalization movement. Autonomist Marxism, then, would come to form the intellectual foundation upon which many new movements, especially Argentine movements, would come to be understood.

While this work did much to raise awareness about the novel social movements that had emerged in Argentina, it did so in an uncritical way and largely in order to promote autonomous Marxism or ‘autonomism.’ Not only were new forms of collective action portrayed in ideal terms as “horizontal” and “autonomous,” but they were also taken out of their local context and represented as evidence that the theories of North American and European scholars could explain recent events in Argentina. Thus, Argentine social movements – or “Argentina,” in shorthand – became evidence that the “multitude” was indeed a global force (Hardt & Negri,

2004) or that activists were committed to “changing the world without taking power” (Holloway, 2002). Meanwhile, the most lucid analyses of these events, which happened to be produced by local scholars (Dri, 2006; Scillamá 2007), were drowned out of the debate.

The tendency to elevate “autonomist” social movements has continued to the present (Dinerstein, 2015; Holloway, 2010; Monteagudo, 2010; Schaumberg, 2013; Sitrin, 2012; Sitrin & Azzelini, 2014; Vommaro, 2008; Zibechi, 2007), despite the fact that autonomist organizations have largely disappeared. For example, there is the case of the MTD Solano, which became famous when it co-authored a book with the Colectivo Situaciones in 2002. I discovered during my fieldwork in 2013 that the MTD Solano has been reduced from a large territorial *piquetero* movement to a single collective pizzeria run by the initial founders.⁸ Yet, many scholars obviate or omit this fact from their analysis. Pablo Vommaro (2008), for example, recognizes the group’s diminishing membership in a piece written while the group was shrinking, but he gives this a positive spin. Marina Sitrin (2012) also recognizes this as a general phenomenon among autonomist movements but claims that these groups recovered from this setback and learned the deeper meanings of autonomy in the process (2012: 13).⁹ In their latest publication, Sitrin and Azzelini claim that the

⁸ In fact, as I learned in my conversations and interviews with members of the FOL, the founder of the MTD Solano had actually invited some of the activists from the FOL, a part of which had belonged to the MTD Solano between 1999 and 2003, to a barbeque in 2013 as a way of apologizing for allowing their organization to collapse.

⁹ While Sitrin makes a claim that many groups began to recover after 2009, she does not tell us what groups she is referring to.

MTD Solano is now a “network of collectives,” which is flatly untrue (2014: 196).¹⁰

One can only conclude that these writers and scholars continue to celebrate and promote the accomplishments of autonomist movements in the face of their setbacks and defeats because of their commitment to autonomism as an ideology.

The irony of having an ideological commitment to autonomism is that this perspective is usually presented as non-ideological. Of course, this should be the first warning sign. In Sitrin’s first book on Argentina, she writes that she does not identify with any single “ideology or practice” but rather borrows from many different perspectives (2006: 17). This is not an accident or a sign of political naiveté but rather a larger trend among North American radicals. Chris Dixon (2014) explicitly argues that the most innovative activists in North America today do not identify with any major tradition on the left, whether it is socialism, communism or others. Rather, he argues, they are identifying as “abolitionists, anarchists, anti-capitalists, autonomists, feminists, horizontals, radicals and many other things” (59). However, the inclusion of “anarchist” on this list should alert us to the fact that this rejection of ideology is, in fact, ideological.¹¹ Similarly, in *Empire*, Hardt and Negri, explicitly

¹⁰ It is unclear if Sitrin and Azzelini are trying to imply that MTD Solano has grown, shrunk or simply changed strategies. In any case, the claim that it is now a network of collectives is untrue.

¹¹ Similarly, note the way that Dixon opens chapter two. The first thing the activist he interviews says is, “‘I don’t often call myself an anarchist’ she said, ‘but I do use a lot of terms like anti-capitalist,’ ‘anti-authoritarian,’ ‘anti-imperialist’ – I come up with a lot of anti’s” (57). Yet, why is there a need for her to say that she does not often call herself an anarchist unless that is precisely what she is?

identify themselves as communists (2000: 350).¹² Thus, autonomous Marxism or ‘autonomism’ is either a new ideology unto itself or it is an ideological investment held by those who identify as communists and anarchists. In either case, we can be sure that, despite their claims to the contrary, those analyzing Argentine social movements and making, at least implicit, claims about which groups are the most interesting or have the most potential, do so with a specific set of ideological investments.

One of the problems with autonomism is the view that self-organization or self-government can replace the need for organizations that engage in hegemonic struggle at the level of civil society and the state. As Chantal Mouffe has recently argued:

The traditional revolutionary approach has mostly been forsaken, but it is increasingly replaced by another one that, under the name of ‘exodus’, reproduces, albeit in a different way, many of its shortcomings. In this book I take issue with the total rejection of representative democracy by those who, instead of aiming at a transformation of the state through an agonistic hegemonic struggle, advocate a strategy of deserting political institutions. Their belief in the availability of an ‘absolute democracy’ where the multitude would be able to self-organize without any need of the state or political institutions signifies a lack of understanding of what I designate as ‘the political’ (2013: XIII).

Mouffe’s argument here is that the strategy of ‘exodus,’ which she mostly associates with the work of Hardt and Negri (2000; 2004; 2009), has fetishized autonomy or what she refers to here as self-organization. This fetishization leads to the fantasy that a society can be completely re-made from below without a hegemonic struggle that aims to transform the state and other political institutions. In fact, this

¹² Hardt and Negri are also aligned with autonomists in Argentina as we can see from the glowing introductions that they both wrote for the English translation of *Colectivo Situaciones’ 19 & 20: Notes for a New Social Protagonism* (2011).

perspective completely dispenses with the concept of hegemony, as we see with those who have taken up the concept of “post-hegemony” (Beasley-Murray, 2010). As one might imagine, this new revolutionary strategy does not leave much room for mass-based organizations and movements, marches and protests, making demands of the state or negotiating with the state or using its resources. From the point of view of autonomists or exodus scholars, a large chunk of the movements and traditions of the left are simply the ‘old way’ of doing politics.

Mouffe’s criticism of the exodus position is especially relevant in light of how this position became influential both among the global left and in Argentina in the early 2000s. Rubén Dri (2007), an Argentine liberation theologian, echoes Mouffe’s critique of Hardt and Negri’s conception of multitude. As an active participant of the neighborhood assemblies,¹³ Dri saw first-hand the damage done by the idea of that groups did not need to organize with one another in the post-2001 environment. In his critique of autonomism, he lays out a three-part conception of power: (1) taking power (2) fleeing from power and (3) building popular power (69). While this is only a simplified version of a subject that is much more complex, we can still use it to discuss the revolutionary strategies of the left from the twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries. The revolutionary strategy in the twentieth century strategy was the strategy of taking state power. The exodus strategy, popularized at the end of the twentieth century, can be understood as a way of fleeing from power. While these

¹³ When I met Dri during my fieldwork in 2013, he said that he was still an active member of a Popular Assembly in Buenos Aires.

strategies appear to be different, they both conceive of power as a thing.¹⁴ The third conception, building popular power, breaks from the notion of power as a thing, understanding it as a social relation to be constructed. Ultimately, this conception of building popular power is what I found in the movements I studied, rather than autonomist notions of ‘anti-power’ or fleeing from power.

Mouffe’s conception of hegemonic agonistic struggle is also crucial to the movements I study here. Through territorial activism and grassroots control, these movements seek to extend themselves further into civil society. This is how they legitimate themselves to outside observers and also gain new members for their own organizations. They also engage extensively in cultural forms of activism, starting cultural centers, popular high schools, alternative media collectives and other projects that work with ideas and aim to transform the common sense of everyday people. Mouffe’s vision, however, is perhaps more institutional or institutionally-oriented than the movements analyzed here. In fact, while she rightly criticizes exodus scholars for celebrating the autonomist *piquetero* movements and romanticizing horizontalism, she counters this by highlighting the achievements of progressive governments in Latin America and those *piquetero* movements that joined and worked with the governments of Nestor and Cristina Kirchner (2013: 76-77). Through my work on the FOL, especially in chapter four, I have been able to show that it is possible to work with institutions but also against them at the same time. I

¹⁴ In fact, it is impressive how much the conception of power as a thing has endured despite Michel Foucault’s ([1976] 1990) forceful and influential critique of this notion.

understand this as a sympathetic or immanent critique of Mouffe. Rather than dispensing with hegemonic agonistic struggle, we need to orient this concept towards the strategic needs and dilemmas of social movements, rather than, or in addition to, the state.¹⁵

To focus on hegemonic struggle is also to focus on transforming people and therefore subjectivity. This is especially important given that subjectivity is a major theme in the work of Hardt and Negri as well as other autonomists. In fact, Sitrin has used the concept of subjectivity throughout her work and especially when faced with the question of the decline of autonomist movements. In *They Can't Represent Us* Sitrin and Azzelini write:

Some people even reflected early on that some of the structures of organization might disappear – though, were that to happen, it could be withstood since people had been so fundamentally transformed. The argument was that the movements would continue if people's subjectivity had changed, individually and collectively. Many today are confident that this is the case (193).

The transformation of subjectivity is necessarily a crucial aspect of hegemonic struggle. A movement cannot legitimate itself or acquire new members without changing some aspect of subjectivity. However, in the hands of autonomists, subjectivity has been disconnected from the larger political world. As we can see in this passage, subjectivity is disconnected not only from the state or civil society but even from the organizational structures of the movements themselves. These structures, which *piqueteros* created in the late 1990s and early 2000s, were mass-based organizations that could mobilize large numbers of people to block roads, make

¹⁵ Perhaps this is already present in Mouffe's thinking, such as when she emphasizes the importance of combining "parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles" (2013: 75).

demands and build power. Autonomists like Sitrin and Azzelini advance the argument that subjectivity somehow has a separate existence from the development of these types of organizations.

In addition to disconnecting subjectivity from the larger political world, autonomists like Sitrin also disconnect subjectivity from time. In the passage above, the argument about subjectivity is phrased in past tense: “if people’s subjectivity *had* changed...” (my emphasis). This point of view privileges a particular moment in the past, presumably when the movements began. In fact, this focus on origins would explain the heavy emphasis that Sitrin and other autonomists put on the moment of “rupture.”¹⁶ Not only does this view locate the transformation of subjectivity in the past but it substantially simplifies the concept: either people’s subjectivity changed or it did not. If one assumes, instead, that subjectivity is always in formation, reacting and changing in response to the environment, then the time in-between then and now becomes much more important. And if we bring time back in, then the question of organizational structures becomes more important as well. Unless we have an unjustifiably pessimistic conception of organization in which organization necessarily and unavoidably leads to hierarchy and abuse of power, then it is surely preferable to maintain or even build organizational structures over time instead of losing them. The question of organization, then, becomes more important, rather than less important, when we add subjectivity to our considerations.

¹⁶ Sitrin traces the moment of rupture in Argentina to the popular uprising 2001, but this does not explain the fact that many *piquetero* movements, began before 2001.

Subjectivity is important for the movements I analyze here but it is a subjectivity connected to the larger political world. Indeed, subjectivity is intimately connected to the central concepts of this dissertation: space and *autogestión*. My analysis of the production of space and *autogestión* understands these concepts not simply as ideas or ideologies but as practices that occur in real space-time.¹⁷ In fact, I understand these terms as productive practices that produce space and thus make new social and political dynamics possible. If subjectivity was not intimately connected to the material environment, if it was not connected to the production of space and social practices such as *autogestión*, then it would be meaningless to produce space or to organize differently. But if subjectivity was truly independent of the material environment, then of course it would be meaningless to do anything in the material world.

Now that I have given a brief introduction of the theoretical stakes of my argument, I will provide a description of the political, historical and spatial context that gave rise to territorial forms of activism and the emergence of the neighborhood as the new site of politics in Argentina.

Neoliberalism and the Fragmentation of Space and Society

The politics of neoliberalism in Argentina has been well documented (Minjuin & Kessler, 1995; Schorr, 2004; Svampa, 2005; Torre, 1998), but more recently, scholars have begun to elaborate the spatial consequences of these policies in Buenos Aires and the greater metropolitan area. At the broadest level, these consequences

¹⁷ I expand on this in chapter one.

can be described as processes of social and urban fragmentation and privatization (Grimson, 2009; Grimson & Segura, 2016; Janoschka, 2002; Prévôt Schapira, 2000; Prévôt Schapira & Cattaneo Pineda, 2008). This includes processes of gentrification, such as those occurring in the southern *barrios* and common tourist destinations of *La Boca*, *San Telmo* and *Barracas* (Herzer, 2008), the proliferation of gated communities (Svampa, 2001; Torres, 2001; Thuillier, 2005), and the emergence of shopping malls, such as the one that replaced a famous fruit and vegetable market in *El Abasto* (Carman, 2006). As Pablo Ciccollella (1999) points out, this process is characterized by an asymmetrical power relationship between global and local forces. This element is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the transformation of the historic port of Buenos Aires known as *Puerto Madero*, whose recent renovations include the appearance of 50-story condominiums and skyscrapers of transnational corporations. Thus, while neoliberalism has produced a narrative of unemployment, casualization, impoverishment and inequality, there is a parallel spatial narrative to be told about fragmentation, segregation and gentrification.

Before describing the geographical impact of neoliberalism, it should be stressed that Argentina has historically had its own axes of class and racial inequalities with their own geographical expressions. These inequalities have revolved around a series of spatial binaries, including: Buenos Aires/provinces, center/periphery, north/south, and first/second-ring. The first binary, Buenos Aires/provinces, refers to the city of Buenos Aires and its long history of having a central and privileged relationship to the rest of the provinces, including the province

of Buenos Aires. Today, this is clearly visible simply by crossing the boundary between the city and the province, whether it is the *Avenida General Paz* in the north or the *Rio Riachuelo* in the south. This centralization is repeated in the city of Buenos Aires itself, which is highly centralized in the downtown region (*microcentro*). The north/south dichotomy refers to the large disparity in wealth and income between the northern *barrios* of Buenos Aires, north of *Avenida Rivadavia*, compared to the southern *barrios*. This disparity also continues into the northern area of the *Conurbano Bonaerense*,¹⁸ which is significantly more affluent than the southern and western municipalities. Finally, the first/second ring dichotomy refers to the rings of municipalities around the city of Buenos Aires. In general, those municipalities which border the city of Buenos Aires, the first ring, have more resources than those that are further out. Maristella Svampa (2006) has argued that Argentine history has been marked by a succession of social binaries such as Unitarians and Federalists, capital and interior, Peronism and anti-peronism, but that all of these binaries can be understood as an expression of a more fundamental dichotomy: civilization and barbarism, as originally expressed by Domingo Sarmiento in his classic nineteenth-century text *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* ([1845] 2003).

Despite its classist and racist spatial foundations, it is important to emphasize that Buenos Aires and the surrounding urban area has historically been one of the

¹⁸ The *Conurbano Bonaerense* or Greater Metropolitan Buenos Aires, is the ring of cities surrounding Buenos Aires to the South, West and North. Henceforth, I will use the abbreviation *Conurbano*.

most integrated cities of Latin America. As Prévôt Schapira points out, the city and its expanding periphery, especially from 1940-1970, has allowed for a large degree of social mobility as well as access to housing and employment for the great majority (2008: 75). It was this sociospatial integration that was largely dismantled in the 1990s (Prévôt Schapira, 2000; Prévôt Schapira & Cattaneo Pineda, 2008; Torres, 2001). Although the 1990s began with an economic recuperation of sorts, this was accompanied by a rise in unemployment and a process of deindustrialization. Unemployment went from 6% in 1991 to 18% in 1995. This inequality led to a geographic polarization of the *Conurbano*. As Prévôt Schapira reports, the northern *Conurbano* maintained good levels of employment while the second ring of the southern *Conurbano* saw an increase in casualization and unemployment as well as a lowering of household income. Thus, the old oppositions between north/south and first/second ring became stronger. But these policies also led to a qualitative change. Prévôt Schapira (2000) uses the term fragmentation to describe the new geography of the city created by neoliberal restructuring. For Prévôt Schapira, the term fragmentation does not refer to the old spatially-based hierarchies described above, but a new, complex process of sociospatial change in which one's social position no longer determines their geographical position. An "archipelagic society" emerges that does not map onto the cardinal directions or concentric circles surrounding Buenos Aires but rather produces pockets of wealth and poverty and leads to greater visibility of social differences (2000: 407).

Fragmentation means that we see a new geography of poverty. Poverty becomes a phenomenon that touches “a great part of the territory” and leads to a “logic of demarcation” between citizens (Prévôt Schapira, 2000: 417). The impoverished middle classes create new social constructions, such as “new poor” and “true poor,” as they adapt to a new social reality. At the same time the borders and barriers between people restrict solidarity and collective action. Alejandro Grimson refers to this phenomenon when he describes neoliberalism as a “factory of borders” (2009: 11). Whereas the previous system of integration was marked by its streets, parks, plazas, cafes and large theaters, the new system has led to a retreat to into private spaces, an increase in violence but an even greater increase in the fear of violence and the proliferation of gates, security guards, and alarm systems.

Territorial Inscription

This spatial neoliberalism does not just reshape the urban landscape but also produces a new form of politics, especially for the popular classes.¹⁹ Denis Merklen (2005) provides a penetrating analysis of how the process of neoliberalization in Argentina and the response of the working and popular classes has led to what he calls “territorial inscription” (*inscripción territorial*). Merklen explains that with this concept he seeks to simultaneously describe

a mode of social insertion, a mode of structuring the popular classes by means of the neighborhood and a form of popular politics, a line of connection to the institutions and a base of support for collective action. Faced with the decomposition of ties based on work and the disarticulation of social protections, we observe the

¹⁹ The term “popular classes” is frequently used throughout Latin America to refer to those who are not strictly speaking a part of the working class. Thus, the term includes those who are unemployed, contingently employed or self-employed. The term is useful in this region of the world where large sectors of the population are not part of the formal labor market.

strengthening of cooperative ties and the shift towards a society structured at the local level (14).²⁰

Territorial inscription, then, is many dynamics occurring at once. It is, on the one hand, a top-down mode of structuring the popular classes that provides them with a connection to state institutions via the neighborhood and, on the other hand, a bottom up form of popular politics in which the neighborhood becomes a base of support for collectivization. As the site for this new form of social engagement, the neighborhood itself becomes a fundamental site of politics. Merklen goes on to outline four ways in which the neighborhood becomes a form of support for the popular classes: first, as a base of elemental sociability and the base of solidarity in moments of crisis; second, as a base of support for individuals to leave for the city; third, as the sustenance of collective action; and fourth, as the level at which institutions that concern the popular classes intervene (14-15).

It is important to recognize the radical break that this mode of sociability represents. Before the rise of neoliberal economic policies beginning with the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, unemployment was scarcely a problem in Argentina. Further, Merklen reminds us that between 1946 and 1989 Argentina had one of the highest union membership levels on the American continent. This is of great significance since it was through the workplace and membership in unions that workers were integrated into society and guaranteed benefits. Understanding the

²⁰ Original: "...un modo de inserción social, un modo de estructuración de las clases populares a través del barrio y una forma de política popular, una vía de conexión con las instituciones y un punto de apoyo para la acción colectiva. Frente a la descomposición de los lazos por el trabajo y a la desarticulación de las protecciones sociales, observamos el fortalecimiento de lazos de cooperación y de proyección hacia la sociedad estructurados a nivel local."

centrality of unions in Argentina in the second half of the twentieth century can allow us to appreciate what it meant when unemployment led to the decline of their centrality following the military coup of 1976. As Steven Levitsky (2003) argues, the decline of the unions led the Peronist Party (*Partido Justicialista*, or PJ) to go through a similar process of “territorialization” in order to maintain its power, effectively following the popular classes into the neighborhood (109). This means that the party’s locally based community centers (*unidades básicas*)²¹ and political brokers became a key aspect of the party’s strategy and success in the neoliberal age. Finally, as Merklen explains, this process is tied to the development of a new subjectivity among the popular classes, who began to relate to larger institutions no longer as “workers” with social protections but as “neighbors,” or simply as “the poor” (67).

As workers lost their status as workers and began to develop relationships and ties to society at the neighborhood level in the 1980s and 1990s, a new repertoire for social movements and contentious politics began to emerge. Among the new tactics utilized by the popular classes were illegal land occupations (*asentamientos* or *tomas de tierra*), neighborhood organizations, roadblocks (*cortes de ruta* or *piquetes*), popular city-wide rebellions (*estadillos* or *puebladas*), and lootings (*saqueos*) (68). Merklen describes these new tactics as having two key moments. The first was a defense of the old social order, which was being aggressively dismantled in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the second came into being once unemployment and

²¹ The *unidades básicas* are a characteristic of Peronism since the time of Perón and thus predate the territorialization of the PJ.

casualization became normalized in the late 1990s. The second period, which continues today for those who remain precariously employed, is characterized by a struggle for social programs (*planes sociales*),²² which became the state's primary response to the mobilization of the popular classes (73). However, another piece of this repertoire are the new forms of territorial activism that are made possible and facilitated by the process of territorial inscription.

Whereas the *piqueteros* are often recognized as a direct outgrowth of territorial inscription, the ERTs can also be seen as a response to the neoliberal fragmentation of space and society. The ERTs are most often framed as workplace struggles, but they have a clear spatial element. First, they were often taken over with the help of the community or the popular assemblies that emerged after the popular uprising of 2001 (Adamovsky, 2007; Bielsa, 2001). Secondly, many of them, like IMPA, have created spaces for the community in their factories. In this sense, they can be seen not only as a recuperation of work or employment but a recuperation of space for the community and thus as a form of neighborhood or territorial activism.²³ In what follows, I provide a brief description of each of these movements and the fieldwork I conducted in 2012 and 2013.

IMPA

²² The social programs are locally based forms of welfare or mandatory work programs for welfare recipients, known as workfare. I analyze these programs as neoliberal forms of governance in detail in chapter three.

²³ I expand on the idea of ERTs as forms of territorial activism in chapter three.

IMPA is one of the first ERTs to appear in Argentina. It was recuperated by its workers in 1998, and due to its unique social projects and charismatic leader, Eduardo Murua, it became one of the most important and well-known ERTs after the popular uprising of 2001 when many more factories were taken over and recuperated. As I explain above, IMPA had over 1000 workers before it was taken over, but during the time of my fieldwork it had only forty-seven. These workers produce aluminum tubes, plates and foil. Activists and workers converted the ‘empty spaces’ that were left over into a cultural center that provides workshops to the community for a small fee, a popular high school that provides an official high school degree, an independent TV collective known as *Barricada TV*, an independent radio collective known as *Radio Semilla*, a silk screen cooperative and a workers’ university.²⁴

My analysis of IMPA is based on five months of participatory observation four of which I spent as a worker in the cooperative. This involved working alongside the production workers from August to December of 2012. During this time, I switched sections often and also had several informal discussions with members of the administration. In December I conducted 12 interviews with production and administrative workers, including Eduardo Murua. Two of the workers I interviewed were active participants in the cultural center, what I call

²⁴ The workers’ university had not been established during the time of my fieldwork in 2012.

“activist workers.”²⁵ In addition to this, I attended several public events at IMPA including workshops and plays of the cultural center, as well as other events.²⁶

IMPA is a typical ERT in some ways, but it is mostly an atypical case for several reasons. First, IMPA was technically a cooperative before it was recuperated by its workers. This is very unique among the ERTs, and a key part of my analysis in chapter two. Second, IMPA is much larger than the typical ERT. Most ERTs in Argentina would be categorized as Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (*Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas*, or PyMES). Interestingly, IMPA’s current workforce of forty-seven is more typical for ERTs. IMPA’s physical size, however, remains very large, and partly because of this it has been able to start a variety of social projects within the factory. In this sense it is very much an outlier in the field. While it is not the only ERT with social projects, it is the only one with so many projects and perhaps the only one that relies so heavily on these projects to provide it with public legitimacy. Finally, IMPA’s charismatic leader Eduardo Murua, who was once the president of the National Movement of Recuperated Enterprises (*Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas*, or MNER), gives it a high profile among ERTs. Murua’s influence is also crucial for the various social projects that have begun at IMPA since the takeover.

²⁵ I provide a more detailed description of my ethnography of IMPA in chapter two.

²⁶ It seems fitting that I made my first connection with the FOL in July of 2012 at an event called the National Encounter of Popular and Independent Cultural Activists (*Encuentro Nacional de Talleristas Populares e Independientes*, or ENTaPI) held at IMPA. This is only one of the many examples of the ways that IMPA opens its space to the community.

Most of what makes IMPA an atypical ERT is what makes it ideal to analyze as a form of territorial activism. Although the term “territorial activism” is associated with the popular classes, the *piqueteros* and all of those that have undergone the process of territorial inscription, IMPA’s impressive size, strategic production of space and connection to the neighborhood and the larger community give it a territorial quality that goes beyond the workers’ struggle to recuperate the enterprise. The creation of each of the social projects can be seen as the production of a new kind of space.²⁷ Further, its reliance on the legitimacy provided by these sociospatial projects means that they are not superfluous but an essential part of the organization. Although this is a different way of producing space than what I found in the FOL, the key characteristics are there, namely, the creation of completely novel and enduring spaces that provide the neighborhood or community not only with services but with a political project to inhabit.

The FOL

The FOL is a nationally based *piquetero* movement, established in 2006 and located throughout Argentina.²⁸ It has about 1000 members in the province of

²⁷ In chapter one I explore what it means to “produce space” while in chapter three I analyze IMPA as a spatial project.

²⁸ The first movements to come together to start the FOL were the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Norberto Salto* (MTNS), *Movimiento de Trabajadores 1° de Mayo* (MTD 1° de Mayo), *Unión de Trabajadores Piqueteros* (UTP) and *Unión de Trabajadores Carlos Almirón* (UTCA). All four of these movements were part of the autonomous block of the *piquetero* movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which was organized into two large umbrella organizations (or *agrupaciones*) known as the *Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados Aníbal Verón* (CTD AV) and the *Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez* (MTR). The MTNS and MTD 1° de Mayo were originally part of the CTD AV, while UTP and UTCA come from the MTR.

Buenos Aires with another 1000 members in the rest of the country.²⁹ Although it is a national organization, it has a place-based form of organization based in residential neighborhoods. During my fieldwork, the neighborhoods of the movement were organized into different sub-movements, which date back to the late 1990s.³⁰ Since completing my fieldwork, however, these sub-movements have been dissolved and replaced with a regional level of organization.³¹ Thus, the movement has a neighborhood-region-movement structure, with corresponding neighborhood, region, and movement meetings that occur every week.³² The members of the movement can be roughly divided into activists, delegates and regular members or ‘comrades at the base’ (*compañeros de base*).³³ The regular members participate at the neighborhood level and to some extent at the regional level. The delegates are members who participate at the neighborhood level and also represent their neighborhood at the regional level. The activists participate at the neighborhood and regional level and often have responsibilities that go beyond this. All members participate in the marches, which still are a central aspect of the movement’s action and identity.

²⁹ If one considers the families of these members, who benefit from access to government resources, then these numbers can be doubled.

³⁰ See figures 5.1 and 5.2 in chapter five.

³¹ I will be referring to this level as the “regional” level or the “southwestern region”. I choose this language in order to avoid confusion between “the movement” as the FOL or as the MTNS. The language of the southwestern region also highlights the way that the movement re-organized itself along a spatial dimension.

³² National meetings are much rarer since they are not as necessary. However, there a good deal of national coordination when it comes to coordinating national marches.

³³ *Compañeros de base* are those members who make up the “base” of the organization. For the most part they participate at the neighborhood level, and do not participate as delegates. Even if they do not participate as delegates, however, many often have responsibilities and ways of participating that take them beyond the neighborhood level.

My analysis is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with the FOL that I conducted in 2013. This involved attending countless neighborhood, delegate, activist and movement assemblies where members debated and discussed strategies. I also worked for seven months with a construction crew that was building a house next to the cultural center at *Las Cavas*, one of the *barrios* of the movement. I worked in other capacities as well, volunteering for the Popular Kindergarten, the Popular High School and performing other daily tasks within the movement. Apart from this, I attended many protest marches, both ‘political’ and ‘demand-oriented’ (*reivindicativo*) marches that occasionally involved more militant tactics such as road-blocks or encampments.³⁴ This approach allowed me to inhabit and literally help construct the physical spaces of the movement as well as to witness the discussions in which their strategy was developed, debated, explained and justified. I followed up on this ethnographic work by conducting over 15 interviews with movement members. Just like my interviews at IMPA, my interviews with the FOL were conducted with different types of members, from those who could be called movement activists, to neighborhood delegates, to the *compañeros de base*. Altogether, this in-depth work allowed me to witness the social relationships within and between the various neighborhoods and social projects of the movement.

Chapter Outline

³⁴ In the shorthand of the movement “political” marches are those for recognized causes, such as: the day of remembrance for truth and justice (March 24) or International Women’s Day (March 8), while “demand-oriented” marches are directly related to obtaining government resources (see chapter four).

This dissertation contains five middle chapters, four of which deal directly with my sites and one which addresses the scholarly literature relating to the spatial turn and *autogestión*. The chapter that deals with the scholarly literature is the first chapter after the introduction. Among the four chapters devoted to my sites there are two that focus on IMPA and two that focus on the FOL. Each site, then, has two chapters, one chapter that concentrates on *autogestión* and one that focuses on the production of space.

Chapter one, “The Spatial Politics of Autogestión,” introduces readers to the production of space and *autogestión*, the main concepts of my dissertation. The first section of the chapter discusses how the social movement literature has taken up space as an analytical concept. I present my argument that social movement scholars have missed an opportunity provided by the spatial turn to analyze the way that social movements produce space. The second section turns to the concept of *autogestión* where I use the work of Henri Lefebvre to provide a broad conception of *autogestión* as a participatory form of organization that is both an ideal and a practice.

Importantly, this ideal and practice is not limited to the economic activity of productive workers but open to all aspects of social life. Finally, in the third section of the chapter I bring these concepts together as the spatial politics of *autogestión*, arguing that this is the most useful formulation for understanding the novelty as well as the potential of the movements I analyze in the rest of the dissertation.

Chapter two focuses on the dynamics of *autogestión* in IMPA’s workers’ cooperative. It is often taken for granted that the if the ERTs are able to produce and

survive on the market, then they are successful examples of *autogestión*. However, while production is absolutely fundamental to the survival and existence of all of these worker cooperatives, I argue it remains important to critically analyze the social relations of production, that is, the social relationships that make up the unique forms of production labeled as *autogestión*. Based on my four-month ethnography of the workers' cooperative at IMPA, I analyze the relationships that shape the power dynamics of the production process at IMPA. This focus on the social relations of production allowed me to discover top-down forms of leadership and organization that threaten the democratic promise of *autogestión* at IMPA. Ironically, partly due to IMPA's unique history and charismatic leadership, the concept of *autogestión* itself and its multiple meanings works to conceal the ways in which IMPA fails to live up to this ideal.

In chapter three I examine IMPA as an example of an organization that produces a subversive geography. Here, I extend the concept of territorial activism to apply to the ERTs, arguing that they can be seen as a part of a larger development: the emergence of territorial or place-based movements as new forms of resistance in the context of the neoliberal fragmentation and restructuring of Buenos Aires and the *Conurbano*. I examine the way that IMPA has gone beyond recuperating the workplace by opening itself to the neighborhood, creating numerous projects within the factory, including a cultural center, a popular high school and other social projects. Based on five months of participant observation of the cultural center, the popular high school, as well as insights gathered from a four-month ethnography of

the workers' cooperative, I analyze the way in which this movement not only occupies space but produces new geographies as it struggles to keep the factory. I argue that while IMPA has succeeded in producing dynamic social spaces, the project as a whole is marked by tension and fragmentation between these spaces.

Specifically, the top-down organization of the workers' cooperative as well as the disconnect between the workers and the other cultural projects weakens the cohesion of this sociospatial project, producing dynamic but fractured spaces.

I turn to the FOL in chapter four, showing how it is able to attain and use state resources without participating in clientelist networks. The FOL's struggle for *autogestión* targets and depends on the use of neoliberal workfare programs known as "social programs." While the vast majority of academic literature on the popular classes and the social programs in Argentina revolves around the concept of "clientelism," this discussion has largely ignored those organizations like the FOL that administer these programs without participating in clientelist networks and thus without trading in their political autonomy. I argue that, despite its marginality and precarious position, the FOL's ability to take resources from the state and administer them according to its own principles and priorities, provides an example of *autogestión* that challenges the inference that receiving social programs necessarily leads to cooptation and a loss of autonomy.

In chapter five I examine the FOL's unique form of territorial activism as a direct response to the territorial inscription of the population. With the return of political stability and the splintering of the *piquetero* movement beginning in 2003,

the movements that came together to establish the FOL would put new emphasis on what they call “complex territorial work” (*trabajo territorial complejo*). I argue that the FOL’s territorial activism is not only a form of activism located in places but one that produces space as well as new identities and forms of cultural activism even as more traditional revolutionary ideologies as well as the everyday challenges of political organizing restrain these tendencies.

In the conclusion I summarize my key findings and reflect on the similarities and differences between IMPA and the FOL. I also reflect on what movements in Argentina can teach us about new revolutionary strategies, especially in light of the fact that observers have noticed similarities between the popular uprising of 2001 and more recent events in Tahir Square in Cairo, the *Puerta del Sol* Square in Madrid and Occupy Wall Street in the United States.

Chapter One

The Spatial Politics of *Autogestión*

This chapter introduces and brings together the two main concepts I use throughout my dissertation: space and *autogestión*. I briefly outline how these concepts have been understood and applied to the study of social movements by a wide range of scholars from different disciplines. My argument with respect to space and social movements is that while space and place have been taken up by social movement scholars as new analytical concepts, this literature seldomly understands space a product of social action and thus has yet to analyze social movements as producers of space or the spaces that movements produce. *Autogestión* is a concept that activists in Argentina frequently use, which loosely translates to grassroots control or self-management. I use this concept to critically interrogate the movement practices that strive to develop democratic subjectivities and build popular power. This focus allows me to make a unique contribution to the discussion of new organizing models while recognizing the complex relationships that movements develop with the state and resisting the fetishization of autonomy or “autonomous spaces” that characterizes much of the recent work on social movements, especially in Latin America (Chatterton, 2005; Dinerstein, 2015; Grubačić & O’Hearn, 2016; Zibechi, 2008). I conclude by showing how the production of space and *autogestión* are mutually constitutive and how they can be understood as the spatial politics of *autogestión*.

The Spatial Turn in Social Movement Studies

It is only recently that social movement scholars have begun to study social movements with a particular framework concerned with space and place (Auyero, 2006; Martin & Miller, 2003; Nicholls et. al., 2013). This work has developed out of the “spatial turn,” an interdisciplinary focus on the role of space and place in social and political dynamics that stems from the insight that space is socially produced. The conception that space is a social construction represents an ontological shift from the Cartesian conception in which space preexists the social. Instead of only conceiving of space as a container of social relations, this view understands that space is also a product of social relations. Further, society not only produces space but is then reproduced by that space in a dialectical relationship. This insight would lead many scholars to inquire into the types of spaces that society produces and how those spaces then reproduce society.

The notion that space is socially produced was introduced not by a geographer but rather by French sociologist and Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who originally published *The Production of Space* in 1974, with the English translation appearing in 1991. While geographers are largely responsible for much of the following discussion of space and place, Lefebvre’s contribution demonstrates the interdisciplinary roots of the spatial turn. In fact, to some extent, the spatial turn was just as much a turn toward space and place as much as it was a turn away from the formal discipline of Geography, which up until the 1970s had largely ignored social

and political issues.³⁵ Thus, the ‘discovery’ of the social significance of space had to fight a battle for recognition even in its ‘own’ discipline.

One contemporary geographer who stands out for her original and eloquent reformulation of space and place is Doreen Massey. The conception of space as a social construction is at the heart of Massey’s large body of work. Whereas Lefebvre’s work on space is largely a philosophical treatment of space and a history of space as a concept, Massey is directly engaged with the political debates of her time. Indeed, Massey continually emphasizes that she approaches space in the way she does not because it is the “correct” view of space, but because of the way it can help us approach particular political arguments (1994; 2005). She is referring to a large range of political debates that revolve around matters of place, for example the nation or the inner city, that become limited precisely because of the conception of space or place that animate them. While Massey did not take up the subject of social movements in any sustained way, her writing has clear implications for how the spatial turn could approach the study of social movements.

It was William Sewell (2001) who was the first to address the spatial turn as it related to the study of social movements. In his chapter, Sewell asserted that social movement scholars had not ignored space, but they usually assumed it to be an “unproblematized background” which they did not conceptualize in explicit terms (51-2). Rather than understanding space this way, Sewell sought to actively theorize the role of space in social movements and contentious politics. He argued that

³⁵ For example, Edward Soja makes this argument in *Postmodern Geographies* (1989).

scholars should focus on the “spatial agency” of movements and insurgents. This included the way in which insurgents could turn spatial constraints into advantages, and how these very struggles could change the meaning and use of space. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey, Sewell also claimed that “social movements and revolutions not only are shaped and constrained by the spatial environments in which they take place, but are significant agents in the production of new spatial structures and relations” (55). Sewell’s assertion was that if space is produced and not simply a background, then social movements are an important part of this process.

Since Sewell’s intervention there has been an increasing number of social movement scholars playing closer attention to space and bringing it closer to the center of their analysis. However, much of this work has continued to see space as what Sewell called the “unproblematized background” upon which social action occurs. Even when these scholars recognize the position that contentious politics can produce space, their discussions and examples almost exclusively demonstrate the ways in which contentious politics is constrained or structured by geography. As a result, the notion that new geographies could be produced by social movements becomes a mere theoretical point, very important when discussing the dialectical nature of “the production of space” but suddenly absent when it comes to explaining and describing the way in which social movements actually produce space.

One example of this approach is a piece by Javier Auyero (2006). In his article, Auyero continually emphasizes the dialectical nature of the production of space and explicitly claims that political contention can and does create new

geographies. Auyero cites Massey's dialectical formulation of space and place as a key intervention of the spatial turn in the social sciences, and goes on to recognize Sewell's intervention and initial formulation of a spatial approach to collective action. Auyero seeks to build on Sewell's conception that contentious politics can produce new geographies and relations by producing a survey of the work of contentious politics in four areas: "(1) space as a repository of social relations; (2) [the] built environment as a facilitator and obstacle in contentious politics; (3) mutual imbrication between spatially-embedded daily life and protest; (4) spaces as meaningful arenas, i.e. space as place" (570). However, counter to Auyero's intention, these four areas do not highlight the ways that movements produce spaces but rather work inside given spatial structures. His survey of literature that discusses how contentious politics occurs in space strengthens the view of space as a container as well as a constraint at the expense of his argument that space is actively produced by social movements.

The many examples that Auyero sites in his review of the literature understand space as if it were only a setting that the political actors must use, take advantage of or resignify. In the first area, contentious politics occurs within "geography, as a *container* of durable social relations" (570, my emphasis). In the second area we are told that "contentious politics takes place *in* physical space," and in another example we are told that it disrupts "public space" (572, my emphasis). It remains unclear from this categorization, as well as from the examples Auyero utilizes, how activism produces space. In the next two categories the fact that

contention occurs within culturally understood webs of meaning, whether these are presented as “spatial routines” or “place,” still presents contentious politics as occurring *within* space. As Auyero asserts in the section on spatial routines: “this collective struggle takes place, literally in space...” (573). In the end, Auyero’s implicit argument is that space cannot be ignored because it contains everything that matters to social scientists: social relations, built constructions, routines and shared meanings. Although he continues to assert that space is a product of political struggle and that movements produce new spaces, none of his examples explain or describe this process, and each example actually works against this understanding of space. In Auyero’s formulation, space is still seen as a container or as a setting for social action. The novelty is that now it has been signaled as a variable that should be considered in the study of contentious politics.

Auyero’s attempt to incorporate the spatial turn is actually a step back from Sewell’s original formulation. Sewell almost seems to have predicted this type of reaction to his call when he writes, “I believe that questions of space cannot move into the foreground in studies of contentious politics as long as the concept remains insufficiently theorized” (52). In other words, as long as scholars continue to see space in the same way that the term is most commonly used – as a setting or container of social action – then they will not be able to deal fully with the moments in which movements produce their own novel spaces. Further, Sewell’s assertion that movements and revolutions are “significant agents in the production of new spatial structures and relations” (55) remains unexplained. Thus, even while space has been

foregrounded in the analysis, it continues to be seen as a setting for social action rather than a mutually constitutive aspect of the social. Rather than being re-theorized, space is treated like a forgotten variable which needs to be brought back into the fold.

A recent edited volume on space and social movements brings social movement scholars directly in communication with geographers (Nicholls et. al. 2013). Much like Auyero's work, the contributions to this volume seek to incorporate what they call the "ontological fact" of the spatial turn, and they explicitly critique the literature for continuing to treat space as a container or as a "distance variable to be considered among other variables" (2).³⁶ The authors state their goal in the introduction, writing that they seek to "provide readers with a state-of-the-art analysis of how space plays a constituting role in social movement mobilization" (3). A discussion of place then follows in which the authors lay out all of the ways in which place plays a role in social movements. The authors state that: "places shape political subjectivities... place plays a vital role in helping disparate actors form into a cohesive political force... place therefore helps generate strong relations among activists... place can enhance the mobilizing powers of activists by strengthening relations..." (4-5). Place, in this conception, is something that has an effect on all the important aspects of social movement formation and mobilization; in other words, it is a variable, even if it is not a "distance variable." As explained above, this

³⁶ The authors do not define the term "distance variable." Presumably, it is their word for space, when space is understood as a variable.

perspective is not so much about how place is a mutually constitutive aspect of the social but about how everything that has traditionally mattered to researchers occurs in place, and therefore place comes to matter by default.

This approach to place removes the dialectical examination of space that Lefebvre and Massey initially theorized. In other words, this approach ignores the way the movements produce space by only analyzing the way that contention operates in space. Interestingly, the one moment where the authors' discussion of place departs from the one-sided account is when they discuss the role of the state. They write, "While place can enhance the mobilization powers of activists by strengthening relations and building common mobilizing frames and identities, states may attempt to short-circuit and disrupt movements by enacting a range of place-based strategies" (5). Curiously, in this sentence, it is 'place' that enhances the abilities of activists to act while the state actively enacts place-based strategies. We might ask: why are social movements seen as passively "enhanced" by place, while the state actively engages in place-based strategies? Are social movements not able to enact their own place-based strategies? It would appear that social movements are at the mercy of an all-powerful adversary that apparently controls space and therefore has the power to "short-circuit and disrupt" their actions. This one-way or non-dialectical approach to space is ultimately a form of conceptual disempowerment of social movements at the expense of state power.

It is telling that the discussion of the importance of place in this volume is framed in the language of place rather than space. If the discussion of space often

conceives of it as an empty container, then place, within this framework, becomes the full container. While this approach might allow for an analysis of all that is ‘contained’ within a particular place, it is still based on an ontology that understands both space and place as containers or unproblematic backgrounds.³⁷ The point of the spatial turn, however, is not to discuss place instead of space, but to re-conceive both space and place in terms of social relations. The approach of the volume, then, while appearing to take place seriously in all of its particularity and messy detail, actually takes place for granted as an entity that precedes social action. This position, then, is less likely to view people or movements as agents that produce spaces or places. Indeed, none of the pieces in the collection are devoted to an analysis of the spaces that have been produced through the organizing work of social movements. Unlike Sewell, who directly claimed that social movements produce “new spatial structures and relations,” (52)³⁸ the literature on space and social movements, even while theoretically affirming the “ontological fact” (2) of the spatial turn, simultaneously denies this fact.

Another framework for analyzing space and social movements has come out of urban studies, and what these scholars are calling “right to the city” movements (Brenner et. al., 2012; Harvey, 2012). This term, which was initially coined by Henri

³⁷ This is precisely the static notion of place that Massey extensively criticizes. In fact, the authors criticize Massey and identify her as part of a group of “poststructuralists who go a step further to argue that coherent spatial ‘containers’ are implausible and indefensible in the postmodern globalized world” (6).

³⁸ I take Sewell’s language of “spatial structures and relations” as a reminder that space is simultaneously a structure and a product of social action. I do not oppose his language of structure, especially since he points out that, following Anthony Giddens, he understands structure dialectically (54-5).

Lefebvre in 1968, is popular not only among academics but also activists themselves who have begun to use it to name, describe and analyze a new set of urban movements that take the city as their domain, often going beyond the workplace as a site of struggle and including demands related to housing, education and the environment. As Margit Mayer points out, these issues are part of the reproductive sphere and collective consumption rather than the sphere of production, the more traditional domain for Marxists.³⁹ Further, these new movements are often led by groups that have been marginalized, both socially and spatially (2012). From this urban perspective, the struggles of indigenous people, people of color and (post)colonial populations becomes more salient. Mayer asserts that because these groups break with the traditional conception of social movements that they have scarcely been recognized by the research on urban social movements (79).

While the research on new urban movements has forced social movement scholars to look at different kinds of movements and to look at them differently, it remains limited in some key ways. First, these scholars have privileged the urban scale as the principle site of resistance. The tendency to privilege of one particular scale or spatiality over others has been critiqued by Leitner et. al. (2008) who stress the need to see the co-implication of multiple scales in any political practice. The particular claim that the urban scale will be more democratic than larger scales, has also been critiqued by Mark Purcell, who refers to this as the “local trap” (2006).

³⁹ Despite Henri Lefebvre’s efforts, especially in *The Survival of Capitalism*, Marxist research has continued to privilege the sphere of production rather than focusing on the problem of how the social relations of production are reproduced.

Further, as Andy Merrifield points out, the theoretical underpinning of this privileging is tautological since the city is given political priority based on the fact that urbanization is now a global process. Yet, it is because of this global process that the traditional city as we know it is disappearing, a fact of which Lefebvre himself was well-aware.⁴⁰ In the end, the right to the city is either grounded in an entity that no longer exists or it refers to an entity that is so formless and expansive that it loses its meaning (Merrifield, 2011). Thus, while space gets plenty of attention in these arguments, it is a space that is trapped inside the urban, a category that is itself becoming more difficult to define.

Spatial or urban approaches to the study of social movements are also limited by their geographical scope. Most scholars using these lenses have focused on Europe and North America, leaving out the Global South. Yet it is many of these countries, and especially in Latin America, where the most developed *territorial* movements can be found (Souza, 2006; Zibechi, 2008). As Brazilian scholar Marcelo Lopes de Souza stresses, the squatters' movement in Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro and the *piqueteros* in Argentina are urban in the 'strict sense' because they are not only located in cities but based on what he calls "territorial identities" (2006).⁴¹ Thus, the assumption that space is only produced or manipulated by those "in power," is

⁴⁰ Merrifield cites an article from 1989 in which the worldwide process of urbanization itself and the large slums that have formed on the outskirts of large cities leads Lefebvre to lament the death of the city. Since the distinction between town and country is no longer so cut and dry, it becomes more difficult to even say what the city is.

⁴¹ It might be more accurate for Souza to say that these movements are territorial in the strict sense, instead of urban. In any case, his point is that they are based on spatial identities unlike much of what gets labeled "urban" in the field of critical urban studies.

also partly an assumption informed by one's geopolitical position. In the Global North, it appears, all the space has been accounted for, it is all private property or guarded fiercely by the state. While privatization and state control are important issues in the Global South, there are important exceptions to this that appear not to apply in the Global North.⁴² Space, in the Global South, has been as continues to be a political instrument of the popular classes, and one that has a longer history than its northern counterpart, even if this has yet to be explicitly theorized.

Other scholars, more directly inspired and influenced by Massey, have taken an approach that focuses more on the politics of place (Escobar, 2001; Featherstone & Painter, 2013; Gibson-Graham, 2005; Harcourt & Escobar, 2005). While this work engages more deeply with the implications of the spatial turn, it has not been framed as a challenge to the social movement literature more generally or as a contribution to urban studies.⁴³ For example, Arturo Escobar discusses the spatial strategies of black communities in the rainforest region of the Colombian Pacific coast. However, he does not explicitly counter the assumption that only states or large economic powers can produce space by discussing the ways in which social movements produce space. Thus, even when space is understood as a social construct, there remains at least an implicit assumption that it is only constructed by those who are in power.⁴⁴

⁴² While I use the terms "Global North" and "Global South" I am aware that they are not nearly precise enough in many instances. I use these terms only to make very general claims and my argument does not rest on this distinction.

⁴³ It is, however, more focused on the Global South than much of the urban studies literature.

⁴⁴ We can also find this assumption in Sewell's discussion of space and power, which reveals a pessimistic outlook on the possibility of producing liberatory spaces. Sewell writes, "All power is ultimately power over people. One way of exercising control over people is by controlling the spaces where people live and work" (68). While Sewell is interested in the

Alternately, if social movements produce spaces, then these must be temporary, like the occupations of Occupy or the manifestations of the Arab Spring.⁴⁵ But what about movement spaces that endure, that are more-or-less permanent? What about the spaces that social movements have produced themselves, not simply taken over? What kind of spaces are these and what do they make possible?⁴⁶ These questions relate directly to my own sites, but before addressing them, I turn to the literature on *autogestión*, the second key concept of my study.

Autogestión

Sometimes known as self-management or “workers’ control over production,” or simply “grassroots control,” *autogestión* is a concept and practice that comes from labor studies and has only recently appeared on the radar of social movement studies. Despite the fact that this concept has usually been understood in the economic sense as “workers’ control over production,” it does not have a strong presence in the history of Marxist thought. Although Karl Marx strongly supported the development of independent worker cooperatives in his “Critique of the Gotha Program,” ([1875] 1978) he never used the German equivalent of *autogestión* (*Selbstverwaltung* or *Arbeiterselbstverwaltung*). The term itself did not begin to circulate to a significant degree until the mid-twentieth century. This fact, together with the development of

ways in which social movements and revolutions can produce space, he does not connect this idea to a different concept of power, such as “popular power,” nor does he discuss the possibility of producing different kinds of spaces as a way of resisting this control.

⁴⁵ It is telling that this limitation exists even in radical theory. Take, for example, the idea of temporary autonomous zones (Bey, 2003).

⁴⁶ Margaret Kohn (2003) asks very similar questions in her own work. I discovered her work only after formulating my own questions.

Lenin's (2011) argument that worker cooperatives were only meaningful under a socialist state, plays a large role in explaining the absence of *autogestión* or other conceptions of "workers' control" among many Marxist intellectuals and labor movements. Although the Marxist argument for independent worker cooperatives, and later for *autogestión*, never disappeared, it was always hidden by the larger, orthodox tradition that understood this as a reformist concept.

Due to the increasing use of the term of *autogestión* but especially because of contemporary debates around the concept of autonomy, scholars are revisiting Marx's thought on these questions. In a recent book,⁴⁷ Massimo Modonesi (2014) traces the history of the term "autonomy" in Marxist thought, finding two major uses of the term.⁴⁸ The first is what Modonesi calls "autonomy as *class independence* – subjective organizational and ideological – in the context of capitalist, bourgeois domination," and the second is autonomy as "*emancipation, as model, prefiguration or process of formation of the emancipated society*" (104). The first, he says, is an indisputable pillar of Marxist thought while the second is not prominent and only articulated by a few authors. Importantly, Modonesi points out, the term became discredited in the eyes of Marx and his followers due to anarchists who understood autonomy in a prescriptive sense, as a concept around which to orient a political project (100). Marx and Engels, however, were not opposed to autonomy as such.

⁴⁷ I will be quoting from the English translation of this book although I find some its passages to be awkward.

⁴⁸ Modonesi also mentions that there is a third use of the term that refers to the cultural and territorial autonomy of people and communities, which he says contributes to the loss of specificity of the term.

They were opposed to the notion that autonomy was always good and that authority always bad, a position they attributed to anarchists and ‘autonomists.’ One of the consequences of Marx and Engles’ position was what they would describe as an exaltation of spontaneity and direct action among the autonomist anarchists, a subject that would continue to be debated throughout the twentieth century (Modonesi 104-5).

Despite Marx’s complex position with respect to autonomy, theorizations of autonomy and *autogestión* within Marxism would be the exception to the rule in the twentieth century. The largest Marxist current to put an important emphasis on these two concepts in revolutionary action was council communism, although they did not use the actual term *autogestión*.⁴⁹ As Modonesi explains, the council communists were inspired by Rosa Luxemburg, and several important political events, including: the model of the soviets in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the factory occupations in Hungary in 1919 and in Italy from 1918 to 1920, the strike and factory delegates in Great Britain from 1918 to 1920 as well as the worker councils in Germany in the same years.⁵⁰ In addition to the council communists, one can find discussions of workers’ control over production in Antonio Gramsci’s early work in the periodical *Ordine Nuovo*, and later in the French publication *Socialismo o*

⁴⁹ In all of the arguments for self-management before the 1950s made by the council communists and others the term “*autogestión*” is absent. Instead, these writers use terms such as: self-determination, self-liberation, self-government, self-regulating, self-educating and, less frequently, the term autonomy (Modonesi 109).

⁵⁰ One of the key texts from these movements is *Workers’ Councils* by the Dutch Marxist Anton Pannekoek ([1947] 2003).

Barbarie led by Cornelius Castoriadis in the 1950s as well as the Italian Workerism (*Operaismo*) movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Modonesi 107).⁵¹ Although *autogestión* has been a part of the counter-current of the Marxist tradition, it is gaining more attention with the revival of interest in autonomy and autonomous Marxism.

When the subject and history of *autogestión* is discussed it is usually treated as an official state policy. Thus, it is most common to analyze *autogestión* as the product of state planning in the Soviet Union or in the Yugoslavia of the 1950s (Lebowitz, 2008). This is misleading in several ways. First, not only is the early history of *autogestión* cut out of the picture, but the story itself is transformed from a bottom-up, grassroots struggle to take over factories and run them under workers' control, to a top-down effort of a government to impose self-management on a population. Yugoslavia holds an important position in these discussions for two reasons. First, it was this case and the larger debate it would inspire that popularized the use of the term *autogestión*, especially in France (Khilnani, 1993). Second, the Yugoslavian case was often presented as the "real contrast" to the Soviet Union's "state capitalism and bureaucratic despotism" (Lebowitz 9). It is perhaps unsurprising that orthodox Marxists such as Michael Lebowitz would tell the history of *autogestión* as the history of an official state policy. In Lebowitz's reading of the "Critique of the Gotha Program," the independent worker cooperatives that Marx

⁵¹ For a study of European autonomous movements including Italian Workerism see Katsiaficas (2006).

referred to as victories are only “*ideological* victories” (1992: 73, emphasis in original). Thus, for Lebowitz, it is only when there is a state policy that attempts to change the larger social conditions that one can speak of *autogestión* proper.

One thinker who departs from this orthodox position and understands *autogestión* as a bottom-up concept and practice is Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre continually came back to this concept as the primary hope for the radical democratic transformation of society. He once defined the term this way:

Each time a social group (generally the productive workers) refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival, each time a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, autogestion is occurring. This broad but precise definition shows autogestion to be a highly diversified practice that concerns businesses as well as territorial units, cities and regions. This definition also includes all aspects of social life; it implies the strengthening of all associative ties, that is to say, of civil society... Above all, this definition points to the fundamentally antistatist tendency of autogestion, the only efficient and active form of the famous ‘counterpowers.’ Certain Yugoslavs committed the error of seeing in autogestion a system, and therefore a model, that could be established juridically and that could function without clashes and contradictions, in a sort of social and political harmony. Instead, autogestion reveals contradictions in the State because it is the very trigger of those contradictions... Autogestion must continually be enacted. The same is true of democracy, which is never a ‘condition’ but a struggle ([1979] 2009: 135).

Lefebvre’s is a broad definition, going far beyond the terms ‘workers’ control over production’ to talk about any “social group” that rejects submission and seeks to become the active agents of their own lives. Further, this principle extends beyond businesses, the usual focus of discussions on *autogestión*, to all kinds of sociospatial arrangements. Further, this definition highlights what Lefebvre calls the “antistatist tendency” of *autogestión*. Here, Lefebvre specifically points to Yugoslavia and critiques those who conceive of *autogestión* as a system that could be put in place through law. Lefebvre makes it clear that *autogestión* is that which comes up from

below when social groups reject submission and decide to become their own masters. *Autogestión*, then, is a form of bottom-up collective action that cannot be dictated or controlled by the state since it expresses a deeply antistatist tendency.

Lefebvre's approach to *autogestión* is especially useful for the movements analyzed here. His broad definition of who engages in *autogestión* is directly applicable to the wide range of subjects we find in IMPA and in the FOL. These movements are composed of various different kinds of workers, from traditional wage-laborers to unemployed and casualized workers. They are also inhabited by other kinds of subjects: activists, teachers, students, 'cultural workers,' neighbors, youth and others. Further, the anti-statist element is key since both IMPA and the FOL are not organizations controlled by the state. Indeed, both of them act in defiance of the state, whether this takes the form of cutting roads and occupying land or running a factory without legal permission.

This theorization of *autogestión* also brings it much closer to the way that activists in Argentina understand and use this term. Whereas *autogestión* has a largely economic connotation as the "workers' control over production," Lefebvre removes this association with his assertion that it "includes all aspects of social life." Once again, there is an important similarity with the way that this term is used in the FOL and IMPA. All of the cultural projects in both IMPA and the FOL, including the popular high schools, popular kindergartens, the media projects, gender commissions, understand themselves as *autogestionado* (self-managed). These cultural projects exemplify the way that *autogestión* is not limited to the material struggles of

productive workers but also includes the cultural and ideological struggles of popular educators, journalists, feminists, environmentalists and other cultural activists.

Following Lefebvre's reference to democracy, we can connect this conception of organization to theories of radical democracy. The concept of radical democracy has been revived by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). They conceive of radical democracy as a struggle that does not have a privileged revolutionary subject. Further, they draw heavily on Gramsci to go beyond class struggle and develop a concept of counter-hegemonic struggle that articulates and connects various material and ideological struggles. While they do not limit the struggle of radical democracy to the state, they also do not ignore the state as a site of counter-hegemonic struggle. Despite the important parallels between these terms, I follow the lead of the movements analyzed here who most often use the term *autogestión* when describing their goal and their form of organization. Even while I use the language of *autogestión*, it is important to note the relevance of concepts like radical democracy, hegemony and even agonism⁵² to the praxis of these movements.

Lefebvre's insistence that *autogestión* must continually be enacted means that it is ultimately in the realm of practice rather than the realm of law or ideas that *autogestión* can be evaluated. Understanding ideas as practiced takes us beyond the question of how ideas or ideologies are articulated or understood. This emphasis on practice also echoes Lefebvre's critique of how scholars have generally approached the question of ideology. In *The Survival of Capitalism* Lefebvre writes, "The

⁵² Agonism is a subject that Mouffe develops in her later work (2000; 2013).

relationship of ideologies to knowledge has been examined while their relation to practice has been ignored. The ideologies which are really effective are hardly distinguishable from practice: they are not expressed at a distinctly ideological level, and they do not appear as ideologies” (12). Following this logic, the bulk of my analysis in this dissertation goes beyond the ways that movement participants describe their actions as forms of *autogestión*, to the way that they put this idea into practice. The benefit of ethnography is that through observation of the most mundane and routine events it puts the researcher in an ideal position to address the issue of how ideas are put into action. The central question here is: what are movement members and activists expressing through their actions and how does this add to, complicate or contradict what they say when they reflect on their actions?

Finally, it is highly relevant that Lefebvre’s broad definition cited above goes beyond businesses to speak of “territorial units, cities and regions.” Of course, territorial activism is a central feature of both the FOL and IMPA, and in this sense Lefebvre’s spatial vision of *autogestión* could be seen as prophetic. This phrase could also be read historically, as an implicit reference to the Paris Commune. But despite this awareness of the spatial dimension of *autogestión* and his own extensive theorization of space, Lefebvre does not develop this conception any further or explicitly theorize the spatial elements of *autogestión*. However, if we recognize *autogestión* as a productive social process, then not only can we think of *autogestión* as something that happens at the territorial or urban scale, but *autogestión* can also be

understood as a social process that produces distinct territories. I turn to this dialectical approach in the following and concluding section of this chapter.

The Spatial Politics of *Autogestión*

Despite Lefebvre's critical endorsement of *autogestión* as the most promising alternative mode of production⁵³ and his extensive analysis of the production of space, it appears that he never analyzed *autogestión* as a way of producing space. This is especially notable given that Lefebvre's argument about how each society produces space was, at its root, an argument about how each mode of production produces its own space (1991). For example, Lefebvre writes, "A second implication is that every society – and hence every mode of production with its subvariants (i.e. all those societies which exemplify the general concept) – produces a space, its own space" (1991: 31). Extending Lefebvre's logic, I argue that *autogestión* does produce its own space and that this should be understood in the same way that we understand the dialectical relationship between society and space. While Lefebvre's method might lead us to an analysis of the spaces of capitalism as the dominant mode of production, my focus here on IMPA and the FOL is on the counter-hegemonic spaces that have been produced by an alternative logic.⁵⁴

⁵³ Although the thrust of my argument has emphasized that *autogestión* is not a mode of production limited to the economic realm but rather a mode of organization applicable all forms of social life, I am intentionally shifting back to the language of production here. Of course, the notion of "producing" space is not limited to the economic activity of productive workers.

⁵⁴ In making this argument I do not mean to imply that projects of *autogestión* do not happen within the context of capitalism. But I am asserting that the hegemonic capitalist context does not cancel out the existence of counter-hegemonic practices of *autogestión*.

The insight that *autogestión* itself produces space allows us to speak of the spatial politics of *autogestión*. At this point I can revise my previous question: what kind of spaces does *autogestión* produce and what do these spaces make possible? This question can be opened up in many different ways. We can look at the social composition of these spaces: are there people of different classes, ages, abilities, genders, sexualities or political ideologies? What can be done in these spaces? Are they for production only or do they include other activities such as meetings, socializing, leisure and study? What is their relation to their geographical context, for example, the neighborhood or the city? How does one come to “belong” to the space? What are the physical characteristics of these spaces? Do they have physical or architectural forms of hierarchy? Once we understand the lay of the land, so to speak, we can inquire into the social effects of these spaces. What types of relationships are fostered in these spaces? Do these spaces produce novel social experiences, if so, how? What do these spaces make possible? These questions are important if we want to know both what these spaces are like and what they are capable of producing.

To focus on the spatial politics of *autogestión* is not only to recognize that space is a product of *autogestión* but that these spaces themselves are productive of new social and political dynamics. This productive element of space can also be understood as what Massey calls the dynamic simultaneity of space. According to Massey, “phenomena may be placed in relationship to one another in such a way that new social effects are provoked. The spatial organization of society, in other words,

is integral to the production of the social and not merely its result. It is fully implicated in both history and politics” (1994: 4). The novel spaces produced by IMPA and the FOL allow us to observe some of the new social effects that are provoked when forms of economic and cultural production and other forms of sociability come together in unique spaces that are generally kept separate from one another in capitalist societies. In this sense, the term spatial politics of *autogestión* or simply spaces of *autogestión* is more appropriate in this context than a term like “radical democratic spaces,”⁵⁵ not only because the term *autogestión* provides us with more of the local context and meaning but also because it emphasizes the productive element of these spaces. To this end, I approach IMPA and the FOL as different examples of the spatial politics of *autogestión*.

Understanding the term spatial politics of *autogestión* in a dialectical sense is ultimately more useful and appropriate than the term “autonomous spaces” not only for the movements I analyze here but for movements across Latin America and the Global South. There is a growing literature that analyzes social movements in Latin America as autonomous spaces (Chatterton, 2005; Dinerstein, 2015; Grubačić & O’Hearn, 2016; Zibechi, 2008). This work often goes beyond describing autonomy as a goal or horizon, arguing that contemporary movements are autonomous in the strict sense of being self-governing or self-sufficient.⁵⁶ This claim, however, is far too

⁵⁵ For example, Kohn uses this term to describe the spaces that she analyzes in turn-of-the-century Italy (2003: 7).

⁵⁶ One scholar that I would on the border of this literature is George Ciccariello-Maher. In one of his latest books he describes the goal of the communes in Venezuela as “self-government – and to eventually replace the state as with an alternative political structure, of

strong in a context neoliberal globalization. The term *autogestión*, which is important in the Argentine context, allows us to think of a form of organization that strives towards direct democracy and is hostile towards the state without demanding or requiring strict autonomy. Even when the spaces themselves might appear to be autonomous, there are important links between these movements and the state as well as the capitalist market. These links are themselves a site of contestation and, as I argue in chapter four, they do not by any means necessarily signal cooptation or a lack of militancy or imagination.

The other problem with concept of autonomous spaces is that this formulation usually understands space not as a product of social relations but as something that pre-exists the social. Instead of understanding movements as producing space, this perspective understands movements as simply taking over or carving out spaces. While space is understood as a central element of contention in this work, it presents a view that removes the dialectical and productive element of space that I have analyzed here. In other words, what is impressive about the spatial politics of the FOL and IMPA is not so much the fact that they are the owners of their own space apart from the rest of society, but that through the production of space they are able to extend themselves deeper into civil society. This extension, whether it happens through the creation of a popular high school, an environmental group or a popular

which the communes are building blocks” (2016: 109). While this might be the goal of the communes in the ultimate analysis, it is so distant from a present moment marked by the crisis and destabilization *Chavismo* that to highlight it risks obscuring more about the phenomenon than it reveals.

kindergarten, provides the organization with deeper roots, makes it more useful and relevant to society and creates the possibility of building popular power. For many of the activists I studied here, especially those in the FOL, autonomy or even horizontal autonomy can still be a goal, but this is understood as a very long-term, indeed, utopian goal. From this perspective, there is an important lapse of time in between the present moment and the creation of horizontal, autonomous communities in which one must build popular power.

This chapter has provided the scholarly context for my discussion of the production of space and *autogestión*. I have argued that despite embracing the spatial turn, social movement scholars have yet to analyze social movements as producers of space. Through my discussion of the concept of *autogestión*, I have shown how it serves as the most appropriate term to describe the form of organization of the movements of the independent left in Argentina today. Finally, I have argued that by understanding these concepts together as the “spatial politics of *autogestión*” we can begin to understand what is novel and important about these movements. It is to these movements and their internal dynamics that I now shift my focus.

Chapter Two

“Don’t break my balls with this question of who is a worker and who is an administrator”: Practical Problems of *Autogestión*

Since the appearance of the worker-recuperated enterprises in Argentina, the concept of *autogestión* has seen a resurgence in leftist political discourse. This concept has reinvigorated debates on the role of autonomy, worker cooperatives and grassroots political action in the process of revolutionary change. However, what often slips out of the debate are the actual conditions of *autogestión* in self-managed workplaces and other political projects. The ERTs that appeared in Argentina in the late 1990s and became known to the world after the Argentine crisis of 2001, present us with the possibility of observing *autogestión* in action. These enterprises are not the result of a statist attempt to create a socialized economy; rather they are attempts by workers to salvage their own workplaces in the context of an economy that was quickly disintegrating. The factories, then, represent a bottom-up form of *autogestión*. Yet, their bottom-up character means that to understand them we must be open to the radical indeterminacy of bottom-up *autogestión*. If we recognize *autogestión* not as a static state but rather as an ideal and also as a process or struggle and therefore as a struggle that can degenerate, then it becomes vital to look closely at the struggle itself. In other words, what do the social relations of production look like under *autogestión*? What does the decision-making process look like? How do workers and other administrators understand their own practice in relation to this concept? These questions guide my analysis of the social relations of production at IMPA, one of the first ERTs to appear in Argentina.

In 2012 I conducted five months of participatory observation at IMPA, four of them as a worker. During my fieldwork I encountered many problems and contradictions with the process of *autogestión* at IMPA. At the most general level, I argue that there is a top-down form of organization at IMPA that directly threatens the democratic principles of *autogestión*. For example, there is a static divide between administration and production workers, producing two distinct kind of workers at IMPA. Further, while decisions are supposedly made among all workers, there is a small, non-rotating body known as the administrative council, made up of production and administrative workers that appears to hold a great deal of power. I contend that this council, established in 1961, is still the principal decision-making body at IMPA even after the worker takeover of 1998. While some workers would contest this assertion, arguing instead that the informational meeting is the most important decision-making body, I found a significant amount of evidence to counter this claim. In fact, I found that the concept and claim to *autogestión* itself worked to conceal the ways in which IMPA did not live up to this ideal. This was a form of *autogestión* that was understood as a static state of cooperative management, emptied of the element of struggle. Thus, rather than establishing an ideal that motivates further participation and democratization, the ideal or concept of *autogestión* often worked to defuse various forms of worker participation or resistance. One aspect that further complicates the story are the conflicting understandings and practices surrounding *autogestión* among the workers. In this chapter, I highlight what I call the ‘activist workers,’ production workers who simultaneously participate in IMPA’s

cultural center. These workers are in favor of the administration for various political reasons and often opposed to their co-workers. Due to this dynamic of a largely depoliticized workforce with internal divisions, the contradictions and other issues that I found among the workers often remained at the level of simple complaining and venting among co-workers rather than becoming political demands directed at the administration or the council.

In this chapter I first provide a brief history of IMPA and its relation to the labor movement in Argentina. Before my discussion of the contemporary dynamics at IMPA, I provide a description of my methodology and how it fits within the literature on the ERTs. Finally, I turn to my material and findings on the social relations of production at IMPA before concluding with a discussion on the significance of this particular case for the study of ERTs in general as well as larger questions of *autogestión*.

IMPA: From National Business to Worker-Recuperated Enterprise

Located in the heart of the city of Buenos Aires, IMPA is one of the most well-known worker-recuperated enterprises in the country. In 1998 it became one of the first factories to be taken over and run by its workers. During the wave of factory takeovers after the popular uprising of 2001, IMPA, and its leader Eduardo Murua, known as “The Basque” (*El Vasco*), would gain much more visibility when Murua became the leader of the National Movement of Recuperated Enterprises (*Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas*, or MNER). This movement would come to distinguish itself as the more radical movement of ERTs, clearly to the

left of the National Movement of Worker-Recuperated Factories (*Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores*, or MNFRT), which was led by lawyer Luis Caro. Before this, in 1999, IMPA had already established a cultural center within the factory, and then in 2001, the first popular high school (*bachillerato popular*) in Argentina, a phenomenon that would become a national movement in its own right (Areal & Terzibachian, 2012). And in November of 2014, IMPA won definitive expropriation of the factory in the Argentine senate, making it a legal enterprise 17 years after the worker takeover (*laretaguardia*). Thus, IMPA's central location in the city, its activity in the community, both outside as well as inside the factory, and the visibility of Murua has transformed the factory into a landmark of the post-crisis labor movement in Argentina.

This factory, whose name is well known in Argentina, was established in the early twentieth century. Thus, it has a long history that traverses the many defining moments of labor, including: the “*decada infame*” of the of 1930s, the Presidency of Perón, the *Revolución Libertadora*, the military dictatorships of Onganía and Videla, the return of democracy and the advent of neoliberalism. As a metalworking factory, IMPA was an emblem of the strong national industry and what became known as the “national-popular” economic model established during Perón's first presidency from 1946 to 1952. Perón himself had visited IMPA in 1943 just after becoming the head of the Department of Labor, and then again with Eva Perón in 1944. At this time, IMPA was manufacturing the *Pulqui*, Argentina's most important warplane, as well as the *Ñandu* bikes that Eva Perón distributed to the poor through the Eva Perón

Foundation. By 1950, due to changing national priorities, the branches in Quilmes and San Martín would be closed, but the Buenos Aires branch was nationalized and included in a new organization known as the National Agency of Industries of the State (*Dirección Nacional de Industrias del Estado*, or DINIE).

Ultimately this organization, which had been left undeveloped, would be liquidated during the Presidency of Arturo Frondizi. The workers at IMPA, however, resisted this liquidation and demanded that the factory remain open as a national enterprise owned by the state. The conflict, which took place at the height of what is known as the “Peronist Resistance,”⁵⁷ led to a compromise in which IMPA became a cooperative on September 12, 1961. The establishment of the administrative council (*consejo administrativo*), which would run the factory like a private enterprise, served to usurp the power of the union’s internal commission,⁵⁸ ultimately demobilizing the workers (Avalos, 2010). Although some union members continued to resist by occupying the premises, they ultimately had to submit to the authority of the newly created administrative council. Ironically, the creation of a “cooperative” in 1961 was not the expression of a victorious workers’ struggle but what led to their defeat. As a result of this unique history, IMPA is one of the only ERTs that was a cooperative before it was taken over and recuperated by its workers 37 years later. In another interesting twist of fate, the recuperation of the factory in 1998 would see the

⁵⁷ The “Peronist Resistance” is the term used to describe the workers’ movement to fight military rule after the Perón was ousted from the Presidency in 1955. For historical analysis of this movement see James (1988).

⁵⁸ Since the time of Perón, an important part of union organization were the internal commissions (*comisiones internas*), which met and operated inside the factory or workplace.

arrival of Eduardo Murua, a charismatic Peronist union activist⁵⁹ and former metalworker, to lead the factory in its new phase as a worker-recuperated enterprise.

IMPA's history as a cooperative means that IMPA also has a unique story of how the workers took control. The crucial moment occurred on May 22nd 1998 when the workers, now joined by union organizers Eduardo Murua and Guillermo Robledo, voted for a new council.⁶⁰ According to the testimony of Oracio Campos, one of the members of the old council could be heard saying "We'll leave it to them and within a week they'll go looking for us"⁶¹ (Avalos 50). After getting out-voted, the old council voluntarily left the premises but did so on the grounds that the factory would be closing. Before leaving, however, they sabotaged factory's electricity system and effectively destroyed various machines by stealing computer chips that contained vital operating information.⁶² The workers then proceeded to vote for a new council of workers. Unlike other ERTs that were occupied by workers⁶³ or simply abandoned by their owners, the workers at IMPA recuperated the factory by voting for a new council. The workers and their new partners in struggle had essentially managed to

⁵⁹ Murua had been an organizer with the Union Obrera Metalúrgica (UOM), which is known as one of the most combative unions in Argentina.

⁶⁰ Campos mentions in the interview that the first thing the council wanted to do was force Murua to leave but Campos made a motion for him to stay and all the workers supported it (Avalos 50).

⁶¹ Original: "Vamos a dejarla para ellos, dentro de una semana nos van a ir a buscar."

⁶² While working at IMPA one of the workers showed me a machine that was newer and more advanced than the machines currently in use, but it could not be used because it was missing its computer chip. He explained to me that the machine was designed in Italy and the replacement cost was equal to the cost of buying a new machine. This was only the beginning, however, of IMPA's technological issues.

⁶³ While there was an occupation at IMPA by 40 workers towards the end of 1997, this is not the moment in which the workers took control of the factory.

politicize the administrative council, the same tool that had originally been used to depoliticize them. While this made the worker takeover at IMPA more straightforward in some ways, it also had the effect of legitimating the council as a decision-making body after the takeover. I take up the subject of the council below in my discussion of the social relations of production.

In addition to a quickly changing political situation, IMPA's production status also changed a good deal. At its height, the Buenos Aires branch had over a thousand workers. Soon after the takeover it had only about 150, and during my fieldwork it had 49, a number which was then reduced to 47.⁶⁴ It is the dramatic loss of workers that left many 'empty spaces' and solitary machines in the factory. The type of production also changed. Rather than large-scale projects, today IMPA's most important products are aluminum tubes (*pomos*) for domestic products, such as hair dye. The *pomos* are shaped and molded from the raw aluminum, painted, given tops and stored in boxes to be filled by the clients who purchase them. The machines are exceedingly old and out of date, more than 50 years in some cases, and they frequently break. Thus, work that could be done much more quickly and with fewer workers requires more time, workers and technical knowledge of the machines.

Beyond technical difficulties, IMPA has traversed various economic and political crises, including a counter-occupation led by workers in 2005. Due to a complex interaction of economic difficulties, conflicts with the government, and a

⁶⁴ One worker was let go after being accused of stealing and another retired just after I completed my fieldwork. I attended their retirement party, which was held at IMPA.

largely absent leadership, a group of about twenty-five or thirty workers occupied IMPA. These workers were opposed to Murua and disagreed with his combative stance with respect to the government. During the occupation they kicked out the cultural center and called Luis Caro, leader of the MNFRT,⁶⁵ to help them resolve the factory's crisis. Murua accused the government of exploiting differences between workers but also admitted that many workers would choose to join the occupation if it meant they got to continue working (Ruggeri, 2005). By 2008, the conflict had subsided and Murua was once again in charge of IMPA, although the conflict had forced him to take a more active role at IMPA while putting other forms of activism, including his work with MNER, in the background.⁶⁶

Today, for those who visit IMPA and listen to a representative of the cultural center, this fascinating and contradictory history is given a particular romantic spin.⁶⁷ Representatives often highlight IMPA's important role in the national industry of the 1940s and 1950s. However, they do not mention the history of militancy that forced the government to compromise with the workers, creating a cooperative that was ultimately run as a private enterprise. Rather than grappling with the difficult reality of this defeat, which led to 37 years of a top-down 'cooperative' operating structure, the representatives present the workers as "strong metalworkers," an implicit

⁶⁵ This is the less radical of the two original organizations of ERTs.

⁶⁶ Murua had been president of the MNER (National Movement of Recuperated Enterprises), which was the first organization of ERTs and clearly to the left of the MNFRT.

⁶⁷ For those visitors who want more details, a copy of Julieta Avalos' self-published book *IMPArables* is available at the cultural center for 10 pesos. This book contains an important history of IMPA and several important historical documents but it also uncritically repeats many of the claims that IMPA makes about itself.

explanation for their militancy and class-consciousness.⁶⁸ The worker takeover in 1998, for example, is presented as an act of worker militancy, but it is not specified that the key turning point was a vote of the council. Although I would find evidence to the contrary, these representatives claim that it was IMPA's workers that opened the factory to the community through the creation of the popular high school and the cultural center. The cultural center also frequently claims that IMPA was the first worker-recuperated enterprise, although this is technically untrue as Yaguané, a meat packing plant, was actually the first factory to be recuperated by its workers in 1996. Further, these representatives describe IMPA in glowing terms as a "horizontal" and "self-managed" (*autogestionado*) project in which all workers have a voice and earn the same salary. The way these representatives narrate IMPA's history, the specific language they use, and the claims they make are all ways of creating a collective identity. What I explore below is to what extent this public, collective identity can be found within IMPA, among the workers who are its celebrated protagonists. Before discussing these workers, however, I will describe the methodology I used for this study.

Methodology

My ethnographic study of the cooperative at IMPA involved working alongside the workers for four months between August and November of 2012 and

⁶⁸ While a foreign visitor might not know it, metalworkers have been an important symbol for Argentine industry and a strong national and Peronist sentiment known as the "metalworkers' homeland" (*patria metalúrgica*) ever since the forging of the industrial working class under Perón. The idea of the "*patria metalúrgica*" was not just imposed, as it were, by Perón but was carried on in the militant union struggles long after Perón was ousted from government.

supplementing this work with 12 formal interviews with production and administrative workers, which I conducted in December. During this time, I also participated in the cultural center at IMPA and attended public events organized either by the cultural center or by IMPA as a larger organization. However, since the workers' cooperative operates to a large degree without much interaction with these other projects, I focus specifically on the cooperative. To the extent that these other projects, especially the cultural center, inform the viewpoints and experiences of the workers themselves, I fold them into my analysis.

In my four months as a worker at IMPA I introduced myself to a world that often goes unseen, even by those who study or promote the ERTs in Argentina. By taking on the role of the factory worker at IMPA I was able to gain a particular perspective that was much more bottom-up than the kind of approach that seeks out the spokesman of a factory, whether this role is filled by the leader or the enthusiastic participant. As a "worker" I had daily interactions with the people who do the hardest and most menial labor at IMPA. These workers arrive every day at 6am, usually after commuting long distances on public transport, and do very repetitive labor until 3pm. In most cases, these workers are long gone by the time that the cultural center or the popular high school gets started in the late afternoon. While IMPA is an organization that is open to the community, the same community that has helped it to resist eviction, the production process at IMPA and the workers themselves are surprisingly difficult to meet. As I would go on to learn, not even the activists of the community projects at IMPA, such as the cultural center or the popular high school, personally

knew many of the workers. Fortunately, by “proletarianizing” myself and adopting the rhythms and routines of these workers, I got to know many of them and to see the dynamics of production as they played out in this unique political project.

In my time as a worker I not only worked, but also attended worker assemblies or “informational meetings” and also socialized with the workers during breaks, lunchtime and occasional social events. I even became personally close to some workers, especially the ones I with whom I worked the most. Although it meant interrupting my routine, I switched positions in the factory, even if it meant abandoning a station after I had finally adapted to it. As time went on and I showed that I was serious about showing up on time, working alongside the others and staying for the full workday, some began to complain to the administration that I should be paid, at least a minimal salary. Thus, after a couple months I began to receive a small compensation for my work. It was after working for four months that I traded in the life of the factory worker for the more unstructured schedule of the ‘investigator,’ doing interviews with workers often while they worked. Since none of the workers, with the exception of the activist workers, were going to stay at the factory any longer than they had to, the only way in which it was possible to formally interview them was while they were on the job, with the noise of the machines in the background. Crucially, I already knew these workers and had a good sense of the major issues at stake.

While there is a significant amount of academic literature on the ERTs, the method of immersing oneself in the production process is not very common.⁶⁹ There are many journalistic accounts that are based on interviews with Eduardo Murua or one of the three workers who participate actively in the cultural center, Analia, Maria or Alejandro.⁷⁰ I saw this dynamic firsthand when college students or other visitors would pass by during work hours as a worker gave them a tour of the shop floor. A team of researchers known as the *Programa Facultad Abierta*, directed by Andrés Ruggeri, engages in a more serious and systematic study of the ERTs. This team is unique in the sense that they do not just take the ERTs as an object of study but actively generate ties and collaborate with them whenever possible. For example, their headquarters is located within Chilavert, a book printing ERT located in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Pompeya. This headquarters is a completely unique space in and of itself, which is equipped with a library and many academic sources on the ERTs, from published books to undergraduate senior theses of students from the United States. These researchers conduct a survey of the ERTs every year, asking about all aspects of the enterprise from the production process to possible political activity. They then make this information public, by publishing it in annual reports that are printed at Chilavert itself and holding events where they explain their

⁶⁹ The only other example I am aware of is Graciela Monteagudo who did a month of participant observation at La Nueva Esperanza (2009).

⁷⁰ All the names of the members of IMPA, with the exception of Eduardo Murua, Guillermo Robledo, and Marcelo Castillo are pseudonyms.

findings to the community as well as mark the growth of the ERT movement.⁷¹ This team has also published its own work on the ERTs that builds on this comprehensive empirical work (Ruggeri, 2009; Ruggeri et. al., 2009; Vieta, 2009). Not only has this team of researchers thoroughly documented an important social phenomenon, but they are also a part of it in a certain sense, and their collaboration with the ERTs is more evidence of the unique ways that these enterprises have collaborated with the community.

In addition to this more participatory and movement-based approach, other Argentine scholars have produced useful studies and analyses of the factories that are both empirically and theoretically rigorous (Fajn, 2003; Rebón, 2007). This work has put the phenomenon of the factories in conversation with different academic literatures including Marxism, social psychology and theories of collective action, exploring the social relations among workers, the question of class-consciousness and the possibility of an anti-capitalist movement. While this work is aligned with my own in terms of its questions and concerns, it differs substantially with regard to methodology. Where the former is based on both qualitative and quantitative methods, combining interviews, participant observation and surveys at multiple factories, my own work is based on an in-depth ethnographic account of one worker-recuperated enterprise. I intentionally chose the method of ethnography precisely

⁷¹ In July of 2011 I attended one of these meetings that was held at Hotel Bauen, an important ERT that is centrally located in Buenos Aires. Upon returning to Argentina in 2012, I also participated in some of their activities, conducting interviews at ERTs around Greater Buenos Aires, participating in group discussions and even taking a class on the ERTs at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) taught by Andrés Ruggeri.

because most of the research on the ERTs had been conducted through interviews and surveys.⁷² While there are clear benefits to this kind of method, it can often lead to a dynamic in which we hear from the same spokesmen of the factories or the more “political” workers who often ended up speaking for their co-workers. Instead of reproducing this dynamic, I chose to immerse myself among the regular workers who usually do not speak to reporters or academics. By working alongside the workers, I was able to gain their trust and have discussions that we never could have had if I only visited.

Going more in-depth and probing the spaces of production and decision-making structures also led me to conclusions that are more critical than some of this literature. Much of the academic work on the Argentine ERTs, while maintaining a thoroughly critical stance, has been done in an optimistic vein. This approach is completely logical, as it seeks to debunk some of the criticisms that the movement has faced. As Carlos Forment (2016) makes clear in his recent essay, not all of these criticisms come from the right but also from the left. Specifically, Forment argues that many radical democrats discussing the “right to have rights” have relied on Hannah Arendt’s distinction between citizens (*homo politicus*) and animal laborans. Where the citizen, in this case, can engage in deliberation, the *animal laborans* is still determined by socio-economic needs (6). This distinction allows radical democrats to maintain “that working people are incapable of deliberating critically about the common good in light of general principles” (7). Forment argues that the ERT

⁷² One notable exception to this is Karen Faulk’s ethnographic study of Hotel Bauen (2008).

movement as a whole is an example that thoroughly undermines this distinction and the elitist premise on which it is based. While I agree with Forment, I believe that the survival and growth of the ERT movement also demands another layer of analysis, one that looks more closely at specific factories and how they understand and practice *autogestión*. This layer of analysis must look at this praxis as it operates in different factories while remaining aware of the larger movement. The ERTs will continue to have enemies and skeptics on the outside, but nonetheless it is necessary to analyze the social relations of production, the decision-making structures and processes, and how the protagonists understand these processes themselves.

The Social Relations of Production at IMPA

The idea and discourse of *autogestión* at IMPA do not operate in a vacuum but within a history in which workers had become accustomed to a ‘cooperative’ form of management. Of course, there are many different kinds of cooperatives, and the workers of IMPA who predate the takeover of 1998 had learned a form of cooperative management that was not qualitatively different from private ownership.⁷³ Crucially, this idea of a cooperative was never challenged or changed. That is to say, the workers or administration of IMPA never made any kind of declaration that the old cooperative form, established in 1961, was inadequate in any way. Neither did they make an assertion that they would create a different kind of cooperative. Rather, for most workers, IMPA remained a cooperative with essentially

⁷³ This was the case for the majority of production and administration workers at IMPA during my fieldwork.

the same form of organization that it had before the worker takeover. The ambiguity of the concept of a cooperative ultimately serves the new administrative council since it both validates the council as the primary decision-making body and can also be associated with *autogestión*. In what follows I will flesh out these claims with descriptions of some of my most poignant findings and experiences in my ethnographic work at IMPA.

One of my first observations after beginning to work at IMPA was how surprisingly ordinary and repetitive the work experience was. Most workers were stationed at a machine where they had to perform a repetitive motion in which they kept up with the pace of the machine. At first, I did not have to work at a machine. I had the job of stacking the aluminum tubes (*pomos*) so that they fit neatly in large cases. These were then taken down-stairs to be placed in an oven so they could be softened and then taken back upstairs to be painted and capped. This is where I met Julián and Alberto. Later, I worked in the printing section (*imprenta*), the largest production section at IMPA. Here, I was stationed at a machine that that sprayed glue onto the end of the *pomo* so that it could be sealed shut after it was filled at another factory. I worked closely here with Esther, Marta and others with whom I developed a close relationship. These positions were both on the second floor. Thus, I got to know all the workers on the second floor to a certain degree since they would occasionally have barbeques or lunch together. Lastly, I worked in the press section (*prensa*) on the first floor where conditions were louder and dirtier. Here, I got to know the dynamic of the *prensa* workers, who were more subservient but also more

resentful towards the administration in some cases than the *imprenta* workers upstairs. Having worked in these different sections exposed me to almost all of the manual workers at IMPA. There are only two other sections of manual workers, paper (*papel*), which produces aluminum foil, and corrugated (*corrugado*), which produces tin plates. However, each of these sections had only one worker each and represented a very minor aspect of the production. The only other section was the administration, which I slowly got to know through conducting interviews and also during meetings.

If the work was repetitive, the politics, upon first impression, were not much more exciting. As part of my role as a worker I was invited to attend the monthly “informational meetings.”⁷⁴ At these meetings Eduardo Murua, the de-facto leader of IMPA, and Marcelo Castillo, the president, would give the workers a run-down of the “numbers,” a report on how much the factory had produced in the past month, how much was earned, how much was saved and other information. At my first meeting I was one of the first to arrive and I watched how the workers, when taking their seat, would literally take it to the back and position it towards the seats in front where Murua and Marcelo Castillo were sitting. I found that most workers approached the meeting with this kind of ‘backseat attitude.’ When I spoke to them about this they would often say that they did not speak very much because they did not have very much education and because they were scared of saying something wrong or “putting

⁷⁴ While these meetings occurred every month during my fieldwork, it was evident that they had not always been so frequent and consistent.

their foot in their mouth” (*meter la pata*). In my conversations with workers it became clear that the process of passively taking in information had become more or less naturalized, at least for some.

On one occasion I was invited upstairs to have a private conversation with Murua and Castillo.⁷⁵ As we talked it became clear that they were aware of this dynamic in which workers took a passive role in decision-making. In fact, I noticed a certain level of frustration and resignation, or at least feigned frustration and resignation, at the way that the workers did not participate very much in meetings, were not very interested in politics and actually seemed to prioritize money above any other concern. This was the reason, according to Murua, that they only talked numbers at the meetings. As further evidence of the depoliticized culture of the workers, Murua explained that they tried having meetings at 3pm, but nobody would stick around. While Murua presented this as evidence of a lack of commitment on the part of the workers, the fact that meetings were scheduled after the workday also demonstrates how the administration prioritized production and attempted to get as many hours from the production workers as possible. Murua also mentioned that they used to have meetings per sector, in addition to the informational meetings, and sometimes workers participated more in these spaces. However, it was evident that

⁷⁵ This occurred during work hours about a month and a half into my fieldwork when I was invited up to the administration office by surprise. My best guess is that the administration wanted to check in with me since I had been working there for some time without having spoken very much to the administration. However, since they explicitly asked me about what I was finding and what I thought, I have the sense that they wanted a chance to be able to explain their ‘side of the story.’ I spoke with the two men for about an hour before returning to work.

there were deeper issues in the relationship between production and administration workers. Murua and Castillo brought up an example of when the production workers proposed eliminating all three breaks of the workday, including lunch, and working straight from 6am-1pm. Murua and Castillo claimed that when they tried this, production took a nosedive because the workers still took breaks and still broke for lunch. Beyond the heady subject of worker participation, then, it was clear that Murua and Castillo distrusted what they presented as the workers' basic drive to get more money for less work. The type of distrust and confrontational dynamic between production and administration workers revealed in this conversation would seem to lie closer to the typical capitalist dynamic between workers and bosses than the ideals of worker participation and democracy characteristic of *autogestión*.

Murua also criticized himself during this meeting. He said that he had a project of producing a pamphlet, with political writings by himself and others, such as Noam Chomsky or James Petras, to give to the workers once a week. He admitted, however, that he had "gotten lazy," and had not yet been able to begin this project. At the same time, he said he knows most workers would simply throw it away. Interestingly, Murua presented this as form of self-criticism, and yet his claim that most workers would probably throw away the pamphlet also implicitly justifies his "laziness." The task of engaging the workers in political activity appeared to be more of a lost cause than an exciting new opportunity for Murua. Even more striking than this acceptance of supposedly depoliticized workers, is the means by which Murua seeks to engage them. Rather than taking advantage of having control of their own

enterprise and changing or experimenting with the actual experience of work itself, Murua proposes handing out a weekly pamphlet, a tactic that takes distant, atomized individuals for granted. Further, the idea that workers who have not gone to college or even high school in some cases, will voluntarily read articles by writers such as Chomsky and Petras is far-fetched indeed. At the least, Murua is right to predict that many would throw the pamphlet away.

More important than the details or the feasibility of this proposal, of course, are the social dynamics that it reveals. Throughout the conversation it was evident that Murua and Castillo had lost patience with the workers, and that there was, again, amount of (feigned) frustration and resignation to the status quo. I found a similar mix of frustration and resignation among many production workers. These workers had a penetrating critique of the hypocrisy of the administrators. Marta and Esther, with whom I worked closely, told me directly that Murua talks a lot about equality but there are days that he does not even show up to work. The production workers, on the other hand, lose a day from their salary if they do not show up. This is on top of the already well-known fact that he and other members of the administration do not show up with the rest of the workers at 6am but rather arrive sometime after 10am. Further, there are signs that the administrators earn more money despite the very public claim, told to all the visitors of IMPA, that all workers earn the same wage. Various circumstances and events raised suspicion among workers that administrators were skimming off the top and not being honest with workers about how much money the factory made, or exactly how its profits were being spent. In a

conversation with Esther and Fernanda, for example, they explained that the boxes containing the final product are always taken at the end of the day, when nobody is paying attention. And when one of the workers who is known to be good with numbers tried to keep track of production, his figures were contradicted by the administration. Esther and Fernanda also told me about various ways in which revenue increases at IMPA but the workers never see the benefit. For example, they explain that now the cooperative suddenly stopped paying for the workers' medication but they have not seen where the extra money went. Similarly, when production increases the workers do not see a raise. Finally, the workers told me that at one point the administration promised that when workers retired or left the cooperative that the extra money would be distributed to the rest of workers. As the years went by, the production workers realized that this was another unfulfilled promise.

Perhaps the most serious piece of evidence that the salary of the workers was unequal was what happened to Sebastián. This was the worker who was "good with numbers" but who had a tense relationship with the administration because they could not seem to agree on how much the cooperative was actually producing. Marta told me that Sebastián had gone through a period where he wanted to retire, but the administration was desperate to keep him on staff. Then, in a private meeting, the administration apparently offered him a higher salary if he would stay on the job. Sebastián ended up deciding to stay, although without taking the higher salary. The offer, however, is a clear indication of what happens in private meetings. During one

conversation with a group of workers I said that the finances should be transparent to everyone. They told me that technically they are. Theoretically, anyone can go upstairs to the administrative offices and look at how much is produced, and who earns what kind of salary. There was a brief pause and then Fernanda asked, “And why doesn’t anyone go?”⁷⁶ Nobody responded.

While this conversation hinted that there was some integrity to the system, I found conflicting evidence in my interviews. When I spoke with Maria, I asked her about the “open books” policy. She told me that this was indeed the rule, but when she actually tried to see the books they would not let her. Importantly, this response came not from a worker who was tired and suspicious of the administration, but one who, in fact, more often sided with the administration and against her fellow production workers. As one of the three workers who participate in the cultural center at IMPA, Maria is an atypical worker who was invested in IMPA as a political project. This was evident right away in my interview with her. Instead of identifying as a machine operator (*operaria*), like so many of her peers, Maria identified as a “partner of the cooperative.” Elaborating on this, she said: “Because it is one thing to be a machine operator of a regular business, but I am not [part of] a regular business. This is a cooperative and I am an owner.”⁷⁷ Of course, Maria’s strong identification

⁷⁶ All quotations from workers in this chapter that are not taken from recorded interviews have been paraphrased from my fieldnotes. Since these have been paraphrased, I do not provide the original statements in the endnotes as I do with the interviews. In cases where the original Spanish offers a different inflection or meaning I include it in the text.

⁷⁷ Original: “Porque una es una operaria por ahí para una empresa común. Que yo no soy una empresa común. Es una cooperativa y soy dueña” (Interview with María 12/13/2012).

as partner of the cooperative and even an owner is an important dynamic itself that I explore below. For now, it is sufficient to say that my conflicting evidence about the open books policy comes from the source that gives it the most legitimacy.

The Administrative Council

Perhaps more fundamental than wages and earnings is the decision-making process itself at IMPA. While it was clear that the “informational meeting” was not a place where major decisions were discussed or decided, it was unclear how the decisions were actually made. I eventually came to learn that there was a body known as the administrative council. The council was known to all of the workers but the administration had never mentioned it to me, and I had never been invited to a meeting. Through conversations with the workers, I learned that the council was not intended to rotate. Marta, one of the workers who confided in me, told me that she was also on the council but she did not think about it as some kind of privilege. Rather, she complained that many decisions were made outside of the council and even within the council there was no meaningful debate. Part of the problem was that the other production workers on the council always agreed with the administration. It would seem that from Marta’s perspective, the council was a mere formality.

Interestingly, as I discovered, the council exists somewhere between formality and reality. When administrators recognize its existence, it is presented as merely the official list of the administrators that the cooperative is legally required to have. Many workers accept this definition. As one worker told me, “the council doesn’t

bite or pinch.”⁷⁸ This explanation of ‘maintaining appearances’ would account for the formal existence of the council but not the actual meetings. Not only did Marta and other members of the council, such as Toto and Juan, tell me about their participation, but also I would watch as these workers were called away from their posts to attend council meetings. If the council was only a formality meant to prove to the state that IMPA was an actual cooperative, then why continue having meetings?

If the argument that the council is a mere formality is dubious, this does not mean that the council is actually taken seriously as a decision-making body with its own rules and regulations. I was fortunate enough to obtain a copy of what appeared to be official list of the council when a worker who confided in me copied it into my notebook in a clear act of defiance. The following list is what the worker wrote:

Council of Administration of the Cooperative 22nd of May⁷⁹ Ltd. – 4/30/2009⁸⁰

1. President: Orieta Martín
2. Secretary: Obregón Marta (Presented her resignation Monday 12/3/2012)⁸¹
3. Treasurer: Cuevas Natalia
4. 1st Board Member: Rivera Toto
5. 1st Alternate Board Member: De Luca Juan Carlos (Passed away)
6. 2nd Alternate Board Member: Sanchez Juan
7. Trustee: Machado Fernando

⁷⁸ The phrase “doesn’t bite or pinch” is my best attempt at a translation of the original Spanish expression, “*no corta ni pincha.*” The figurative meaning is that something is harmless, and in the case of the council it means that it carries no political weight.

⁷⁹ The legal name of IMPA is the *22 de Mayo*. While, this name is only used for legal purposes, there are workers who are confused by the continued use of the name IMPA. Some even told me that when IMPA was in the news they were confused as to why it was being called IMPA instead of *22 de Mayo*.

⁸⁰ Numbers 2-4 and 6-7 are pseudonyms.

⁸¹ This parenthetical note was in the original list that the worker used write the copy. It was clearly a recent addition to the original list since the date is more than three years after the list was written.

8. Alternate Trustee: Castillo Marcelo⁸²

The list that this worker gave me has some important contradictions that an outsider would not immediately notice. First, as the worker pointed out to me, the actual president on paper is Martin Orieta rather than Marcelo Castillo. This is important because all the workers know Marcelo Castillo, who is here listed as the “alternate trustee,” as the president.⁸³ However, what makes this even more problematic is the fact that Orieta has retired and no longer works at the cooperative. The list also reveals issues that would be evident to anyone. Point number five on the list tells us that the 2nd Alternate Vocal, Juan Carlos de Luca, has passed away and was never replaced, a fact that this worker made sure I registered. Secondly, it appears that Marta Obregón, who had been so cynical about the council, had willfully resigned.⁸⁴ Finally, the official list has no mention of Eduardo Murua who, although he is clearly the leader and head of IMPA and certainly the most important council member.

⁸² Original: Consejo de Administración de la Coop. 22 de Mayo de Trabajo Limitada – 30/04/2009

1. Presidente: Orieta Martín
2. Secretaria: Obregón Marta (Presenta su Renuncia Lunes 03/12/12)
3. Tesorera: Cuevas Natalia*
4. 1° Vocal Titular: Rivera Toto
5. 1° Vocal Suplente: De Luca Juan Carlos (Falleció)
6. 2° Vocal Suplente: Sanchez Juan
7. Síndico Titular: Machado Fernando
8. Síndico Suplente: Castillo Marcelo

⁸³ In fact, the “unwritten” version of the hierarchy is almost just as confusing as the written version since Eduardo Murua is clearly the leader even though Castillo has the title of “president.” When I asked the workers what Murua’s official title was they were not able to tell me or they would simply tell me that he was the “head.”

⁸⁴ Interestingly, Marta told me nothing about this and I had to learn it from Horacio.

My claim, then, is that the purpose of the council at IMPA is not only to maintain appearances but also to perpetuate the status quo. Of course, as I argued above, even the continued existence of the council is a perpetuation of IMPA's long-time organizational model and a refusal to break with previous practices. In fact, in the 2004 testimony of Oracio Campos, IMPA's first President after the takeover, one can see that the workers initially thought of the council as a tool that would allow them to spend less time in meetings and more time on production. Campos states:

In that way we continued to grow, five [pesos] per day, 50 on the weekend. And to buy primary materials sometimes we took home less [money]. Because otherwise on Monday we would have nothing to work with. And then instead of five it was ten pesos and instead of 50 it was 70 or 80 and there the workers asked us not to do the informational meeting because we would lose a day of work; and there they started to value a day's work. And if we had chosen a council why would we lose a day? We were losing turnover so we started doing [the informational meeting] once a month, once every month and a half, two months" (Avalos 51).⁸⁵

It could very well be that this approach to the political economy of the factory made sense in the first years after the takeover. Money was extremely tight as the workers very slowly began to earn more than they did during the low point of 1998. In fact, during the difficult years many workers had to move back home with their parents while at the factory they earned barely enough money to cover the cost of the commute. However, it is also clear from this testimony that the council served as a substitute for having assemblies among all the workers. The workers began to rely on

⁸⁵ Original: Así fuimos creciendo cinco por día, cincuenta los fines de semana. Y para comprar la materia prima a veces llevábamos menos. Porque sino el lunes no teníamos con que trabajar. Y después ya en vez de cinco eran diez pesos y en vez de cincuenta eran setenta u ochenta y ahí los compañeros ya pedían que no se haga la reunión informativa porque perdíamos un día de trabajo; y ahí ya empezaban a valorar lo que era un día de trabajo. Y que si habíamos elegido un consejo para qué íbamos a perder un día. [sic] Estábamos perdiendo facturación, así que empezamos a hacer cada un mes, cada mes y medio, dos meses.

the council to spend less time in meetings and more on production. If the council, then, was entrusted with more power in order to prioritize production, at a time when this could have been justified, it was certainly not put under more scrutiny at the same time or at a later point. As we can see from Campos' testimony, the frequency of the informational meetings was decreasing at this crucial moment.

When I asked Eduardo Murua about the issue of the council during my interview, he made it very clear that there would be no elections or rotation of leadership positions. For him, this position is tied to his revolutionary ideology. Murua traces his political roots to his own involvement with *Montoneros*, a revolutionary and Peronist guerrilla organization that was active in the 1970s. Just like many revolutionary urban guerilla movements, the *Montoneros* had a hierarchical organizing structure and a tense relationship with the discourse of democracy. Murua not only inherited this particular political framework but continues to see the world in these militarized terms. On another occasion he made it clear to me that he did not think much about liberal democracy as represented by the United States. He was, however, far more sympathetic to national leftist parties such as Christina Kirchner's government in Argentina or Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. However, democracy as such does not tug on Murua's conscience. He had the same reservations about "horizontalism," and unlike the representatives of the cultural center, Murua explicitly denied that IMPA is horizontal. On another occasion, while speaking about the cultural center, he explicitly recognized that it would not have been accepted by the workers if it had been brought to a vote but nonetheless it was

an “obligation” to have it and the workers would have to “take it” (*lo tienen que comer*) because “after all, they know I’m a militant and this comes with my project.”⁸⁶

Returning in to Campos’ comments, we can see that for him and presumably for others there was no reason to “lose a day” if the workers have already chosen a council. This logic, of course, fails to question the council itself as a decision-making body. As described above, the council was first used as a weapon to co-opt the workers of IMPA during the Peronist Resistance. However, what makes this more ironic today is the fact that the attitude towards decision-making and production is largely the same in 2012 as it was in 2004, even after the salary improved dramatically. While I worked at IMPA I found that there was virtually no questioning of the council and only slightly more attention paid to the informational meetings. Even more evident was the attitude towards production. In fact, during my fieldwork there was an occasion in which the workers informally decided to work an extra two hours every day simply for the extra money. Although this extra two hours, on top of the nine hours that workers already spent in the factory as well as the long commute that most had, made for a grueling schedule, virtually all the workers quickly agreed to it.

The October Plan

⁸⁶ The literal translation of Murua’s actual phrase would be “they have to eat it.” The vulgar connotations of this phrase are intentional here.

The decision to work an extra two hours per day, a proposal that became known as the “October Plan,” was not discussed at an informational meeting or debated among the workers as one might imagine. Instead, Murua made the proposal to each section separately, announcing that there was a potential new customer but they would need to increase production if they could hope to sell to them. Although it was worded as a proposal, the salary figure Murua mentioned at the end of the informal meeting seemed to seal the deal. The workers’ approval was taken for granted when nobody spoke against it. The meeting I witnessed was more like an announcement and did not take much longer than five minutes. Interestingly, the only note of conflict was a point that Murua himself brought up: “And don’t break my balls with this question of who is a worker and who is an administrator. You know very well that we are all workers here.”

As I would find out later, the meeting in the *imprenta* section upstairs was a bit more contentious and was the likely the impetus for this comment to the *prensa* section. Marta told me about how during the meeting Federico had challenged the distribution of salary under this plan. Essentially, Federico had questioned the fairness of administrators also earning more money when it was only the manual workers who would be putting in the extra work. According to Marta, Murua’s response to this was to claim that because the machines belong to everyone, what they produce also should go to everyone. In an ironic twist of logic, collective property turned against the workers themselves. Of course, while the machines belong to everybody, everybody does not work them, and everybody knows it.

Murua's reference to collective ownership of the machines as a justification for equal pay without equal work did not confuse anyone. Marta ended her story by laughing and saying, "look at the stupid things he says." Although the workers were not convinced by Murua's muddled logic, it was enough to end the discussion. Clearly, the problem here is not it is not so much a matter of the production workers understanding the politics of collective ownership, but the difficult work of confronting the administrators and challenging the established power dynamic. In addition to this, it is clear that the workers also valued the opportunity to work more hours and earn extra money, even if it was not under the ideal conditions.

Some might argue that the "October Plan" is evidence that worker cooperatives that operate "under capitalism" lead to self-exploitation. While this type of arrangement could be seen as a form of self-exploitation, the argument that it developed because IMPA operates within or "under" capitalism is a reductive and ideologically motivated charge. As outlined above, there is an unbroken tradition of privileging production over worker participation at IMPA that did not change with the worker takeover in 1998. Instead of questioning this 'productivism' and the decision-making bodies of the cooperative, the workers took advantage of the council to liberate themselves from the task of participating in decision-making. Of course, it should be recognized that all of this happened within the context of years of economic deprivation. While I stated above that the workers were earning decent money for their class position, this was not the case until the end of 2011. It is this way of organizing production and decision-making within IMPA that is much more relevant

for this discussion than IMPA's insertion in the capitalist marketplace. In fact, it is precisely these specific details about the social relations of production at IMPA that would go under the radar of an argument that is fixated on the "capitalist market."

As I make this argument it should be taken as a given that the social relations of production are always in constant movement. As we can see from the example above, some workers pushed back against what they saw as unfair remuneration. Although they ultimately consented to the new policy, they were at least able to register their complaint. Further, as Marta's comment shows, the worker's concession was not due to so much to their inability to understand the issue or present their case but the power dynamics at play as well as the lack of a tradition of collective debate and decision-making at the factory.

At another impromptu meeting held downstairs in the *prensa* section, I listened as Murua once again attempted to quickly patch up tensions between workers and between the workers and the administration. In the *prensa* section IMPA was coming up against difficult problems with production. Initially, there were only two workers downstairs who knew how to fix the machines when they broke. However, one of them, Antonio, had been caught stealing and ended up leaving IMPA.⁸⁷ This in itself was very much a political affair as Antonio was one of the workers who was opposed to Murua and who had participated in the counter-occupation of 2005. The other worker was left not only with the responsibility of fixing each machine that

⁸⁷ I watched Antonio fight with Murua and Castillo during the first informational meeting I attended. About a month later a meeting was called to inform the workers of the theft and the dismissal of Antonio.

broke but also teaching the others how to do it. Murua called the meeting to convince the workers of the importance of learning these skills. Clearly, having only one worker who was very close to retirement with this valuable knowledge was a dangerous situation. Moreover, this worker did not get along with many of the others and often did not teach the others how to fix the machines. While the democratic impulse *autogestión* implies the socialization of this kind of technical information, this was proving difficult at IMPA. Only after coming up against a completely desperate situation did the idea of sharing information among co-workers come up. And yet, even at this urgent moment it was proving difficult to get around the social barriers that were maintaining the ‘old’ social relations of production.

After quickly attempting to patch up this issue between the workers, Murua suddenly changed the subject and began to defend the decision not to hire more workers. Standing in the middle of the huddled workers he said, “You might be thinking, ‘what idiots, why don’t they hire more people?’ If we hire workers we have to take time to train them, hopefully they learn quickly, and hopefully they’re a good *compañero* – and in the meantime production decreases along with salary.” What first struck me about this comment is that it was completely unsolicited. Although nobody at the meeting had said anything about hiring more workers, Murua felt the need to defend himself on this point. But more importantly, it is significant that his defense is framed in terms of economic interest. Yet, when I spoke with the workers, most were in favor of hiring more workers and in fact claimed that it would improve production. Further, Marta told me directly that the administration gets stubborn

about this and does not want the salary to go down. This is essentially what comes out in Murua's comments to the *prensa* section. While there is a mention of finding a "good *compañero*," the crux of the argument is really the time it takes to train new people and the fact that this will slow production and reduce salary. Although the workers and the administration share the goal of increasing production, the administration seems intent on accomplishing this by simply by asking the production workers to work harder. The position that the workers only care about money, which was clearly implied in my meeting with Murua and Castillo, is not borne out by the facts. Quite the contrary, it is the production workers who are willing to take a reduction in salary order to increase production in the long run. In a factory where many workers are very close to retirement, this is clearly the more logical and rational position. It would appear that the divide between 'workers' and 'administrators,' which was never fully questioned at IMPA, has led to a familiar dynamic in which the owners or the administrators make bad economic decisions that can even put the business at risk.⁸⁸ In any event, there are clearly elements of worker exploitation at IMPA.

Divisions Among Workers

The contradictions and injustices at IMPA are not a clear-cut matter of the abuse of workers by an unaccountable leadership; they also involve the lack of

⁸⁸ I call this a "familiar" dynamic since many of the ERTs went 'out of business' not only because of the economic downturn in the late 1990s but because the owners mismanaged the business or simply stole the resources of the business including government subsidies and worker salaries.

solidarity among the workers themselves. One of the stories that is never told when activists or other writers narrate IMPA's history is the story of Nieves. Nieves was worker at IMPA who was injured badly while she was on the job before the worker takeover in 1998. When she went to the doctor she was given poor treatment and she eventually sued the doctor. In the legal battle that followed, a lawyer visited IMPA to do an examination of the working conditions. Unfortunately, her co-workers got the idea that Nieves was suing the factory, to which they took offense. However, the lawyer's assessment of the working conditions at IMPA ended up being one of the final straws that fully de-legitimated the old administrative council, setting up the 1998 meeting in which it would be voted out. In the meantime, Nieves' injury meant that she would have to get her arm amputated as well as leave the factory permanently. As she told me this story, Esther pointed out that if "it wasn't for her [Nieves] we wouldn't be here right now." And yet, most of Nieves' co-workers continued to resent her and never helped her with any of her medical bills. To this day she remains a forgotten figure in IMPA's history.

For Esther, the story of Nieves is clearly illustrative of larger processes at IMPA. After telling me this story, Esther drew a parallel between this example and a much more recent moment when the cooperative decided to stop paying for the cost of the workers' medication: "They didn't even respect me enough to say look, now that you have this other support what we're going to do is... No. They treat us like dogs." For Esther, it is clear that the story of Nieves illustrates not only the abusive and offensive treatment of the workers by the administration but also the lack of

solidarity among the workers themselves. Of course, the story of Nieves is not part of IMPA's public narrative. Instead, the takeover itself is usually understood as evidence of solidarity among the workers that is easier to assume and take for granted than to corroborate.

The story of Nieves is significant not only as part of the 'historical record' of IMPA but is also indicative of the type and quality of relationships that have developed within the factory. Esther told me another story about a time when she developed a disease in her legs that left her unable to walk for extended periods of time. She says that she was staying at home because she was unable to commute to work, to walk to the bus, make the connection with the train, risk having to stand up on the train, and so forth. At one point Murua offered to send her a taxi so she would be able to come to work, but Esther declined the offer because of how it might be seen by her co-workers. Later, Murua insisted and told Esther that he was not concerned about her legs but just wanted her to be able to get to work. Esther laughed as she told the story and said her response was "even less" (*menos todavía*), meaning that Murua's clarification only made the proposition that much more unattractive and even insulting. For her, the episode represented another example of how the workers are treated like dogs. But what is specifically salient about this example is the extent to which the administration will go to continue exploiting the production workers. Later, when I brought up this story to Marta she confirmed this for me, saying, "that's what hurts the most."

Activist Workers

The tensions between the workers and the administration described above may make the administration appear illegitimate, and of course, for some it is. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that for the majority of workers, even many of those I have mentioned here, IMPA's leadership is still legitimate. For these workers IMPA's economic success is absolutely fundamental. All other issues or injustices are evaluated within the context of a factory that functions. Beyond the economic context, many of these workers understand *autogestión* to mean working for a cooperative. When I brought up issues such as the administrative council or other injustices they told me that this was what it meant to work for a cooperative. These were the moments when I realized how much continuity there was between IMPA's functioning before and after the takeover. Interestingly, these workers embraced the language of *autogestión*, but they understood it to mean the kind of labor they had grown accustomed to before the takeover. Even when they acknowledged problems, these workers still understood their action in the terms of *autogestión*.

On the other hand, the most politicized workers at IMPA also understood their action in terms of *autogestión* but had a radically different conception of it. These workers, what I am calling the "activist workers," praise Murua and the rest of the administration for successfully running the factory as well as for politicizing IMPA and creating projects like the cultural center and the popular high school. Rather than aiming their critique at the administration, they focus on the way in which their co-workers do not participate enough. Even when these workers run into contradictions, such as the examples of the financial records or the council, discussed above, these

instances are justified and rationalized. These cases reveal an ironic, almost paradoxical, logic at work in which IMPA's status as a worker-recuperated enterprise, which is the fact that the concept of *autogestión* actually prevents these activist workers from seeing these incidents as evidence of exploitation or corruption. This is very similar to the paradoxical logic that led to the cooptation of the workers' struggle at IMPA in 1961. Once again, the claim of collective ownership and operation actually functions as a rhetorical tactic to defuse any criticism or resistance from the workers.

One of the elements at work here is the status of Eduardo Murua as a high profile activist. Not only has Murua been successful getting IMPA up and running but he has thoroughly politicized the space itself by opening the factory to the community creating a cultural center, a popular high school and other social projects. Beyond this, Murua was the president of the National Movement of Recuperated Enterprises (*Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas*, or MNER), a post that gave him a very high degree of visibility, not only within Argentina but also beyond. For example, in 2005, Hugo Chávez interviewed Murua on his TV and radio program "Aló Presidente!"⁸⁹ During my interview with Maria, one of the activist workers, she told me about how her first interaction with Murua was actually an argument. She described the way in they ended up yelling at each other but then explained that this

⁸⁹ The transcript of this interview is available in Avalos (2010). The irony of Murua's appearance on Chávez's program is that this occurs at the same time as the 'counter-occupation' of IMPA. Thus, Murua reaches the highest and lowest point of his political trajectory at the same time.

had occurred before she “found out what Eduardo was.”⁹⁰ When I asked her to clarify what this meant, she said:

Later I found out that it was Eduardo Murua who ran the factory, who was the head of the factory. Eduardo... that white head⁹¹ is from all the ideas he has if you ask me. He’s like the illuminated one. Yeah, I’m telling you this straight up: the guy isn’t in the factory and the factory falls apart. It happened in 2005. They kick the guy out of the factory because of this mess with the robbery and bam. Done. From 2005 to 2008 a total mess, every day. The factory fell and kept falling. All that mess was because Eduardo wasn’t here.⁹²

This was a vision of Murua I found not only among the activist workers but among most activists who participated in the cultural center, the popular high school and the independent TV and radio programs at IMPA. It was clear that Eduardo had earned a reputation for himself in the political world that brought him respect from the activists at IMPA. Just like Maria, these activists have the attitude that they would not even be where they are if it was not for Murua. This mix of admiration and gratitude is part of what created a kind of “founding father” figure out of the leader of IMPA.

As I found in my conversations with Eduardo and especially in my interview, he did not hesitate in claiming the legitimacy and the authority that workers like Maria gave him. For example, when I pushed him on the question of rotating the

⁹⁰ The “what” here is an affectionate form of objectification. Natalia is suggesting that Eduardo is more of a phenomenon than a person. Original: “Y después me enteré que era Eduardo.”

⁹¹ A reference to Murua’s silvery white hair. Interestingly, this comment reveals the opposite sentiments of Marta’s sarcastic joke that Murua’s hair is “so white that it’s turning yellow.”

⁹² Original: “Después me enteré que era Eduardo Murua el que manejaba la fábrica, la cabeza de la fábrica. Eduardo... la cabeza blanca, es de todas las ideas que tiene para mí. Es como el iluminado. Si, esto te lo digo de una, ósea, el chabón no está en la fábrica y la fábrica se cayó. Pasó en el 2005. Al chabón lo echan de la fábrica por este quilombo de robo... Fa! Listo, 2005 hasta 2008 quilombo, todos los días. Le cayó la fábrica, un montón, un montón. Todos esos quilombos fue porque no estaba Eduardo” (Interview with María 12/13/2012).

council he made it clear that it was not going to rotate and that nobody was going to take his position. He told me that if he were not the head of IMPA he would leave. He added, without being prompted, that nobody had ever kicked him out of the factory. According to him, he had left in 2005 and come back in 2008 completely of his own accord. As I describe above, he was very well aware that he was bringing his own political project to IMPA, and that it could be no other way. And yet, while one might want to critique his vertical and personalist style, it is difficult to deny his effectiveness. Murua's actions, despite all of his limitations, show the importance not only of being a leader but of recognizing early on that the closing factories could become the terrain for a new struggle. Beyond this, Murua's approach at IMPA continues to be one of the most inventive. He opened space within the factory for novel social projects and actively organized with other factory occupations, often collaborating personally and using IMPA's resources to assist other worker occupations.⁹³ Thus, Murua has justifiably earned the respect and admiration of many. The largely critical perspective that I have elaborated here is an attempt to show what is often left out of this activist account.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are top-down forms of organization and leadership threaten the democratic promise and project of *autogestión* at IMPA. By looking closely at the relations of production, I found evidence of exploitation, corruption and an undemocratic organizational structure. Rather than attributing these cases to the

⁹³ I expand on these points in Chapter three where I discuss IMPA as a sociospatial project.

work of capitalism and IMPA's position "below" or "within" it, I understand these issues within the context of IMPA's history.⁹⁴ Not only was IMPA's combative labor movement coopted in 1961, but the worker takeover of 1998 did not fundamentally question this history, especially the role of the administrative council. In my own experience at IMPA I saw the production workers and the administrative workers privilege productivity and salary over democracy and equity. Crucially, however, I also saw some of the production workers push back against this arrangement. Unfortunately, the production workers were ultimately divided amongst themselves and, despite the history of the takeover and the struggle to keep the factory, they did not have a strong culture of debate and collective decision-making. Finally, those production workers who understood themselves as militants did not see corruption or an undemocratic process but rather a lack of participation among their co-workers, and, as a result, they were more aligned with the leadership than with their co-workers.

I have also argued that the concept of *autogestión* is used, ironically, to justify these practices. Although the workers have very different positions with respect to *autogestión*, it would appear that the ambiguity and the contested nature of the term allow for these diverging meanings to co-exist. For many of the regular production workers, IMPA's organizational structure, including the informational meetings, the

⁹⁴ While I do not discuss them in this chapter, my own critique of this position is influenced by J.K. Gibson-Graham, who argue that much of Marxist discourse has constructed "a Capitalism, whether global or national, in the face of which all of our transformative acts are ultimately inconsequential" (1996: 253).

council and the static divide between administrators and workers, was the proper structure of a “cooperative.” Beyond economic necessity, this is the fundamental reason why the council as a decision-making body was not challenged. As this council ran the enterprise like a private business during much of IMPA’s history, the workers had grown accustomed to its presence and did not even demand that it rotate. While many of these workers were able to push back against the administration in some instances, their resistance was seldom framed in political terms. And although much of them were able to see hypocrisy on the part of the administration, they ultimately prioritized production over democracy in decision-making.

The position of the activist workers is also influenced by their conception of what it means to be a cooperative or as they are more apt to put it, *autogestión*. These workers take seriously the fact that all workers are actually co-owners and part of the decision-making process. For them, the informational meetings are important moments of collective deliberation. If the workers do not take advantage of them, it is because they devote more energy to gossiping in the hallway than bringing up the issues at the appropriate time and place. Further, they point to the activist projects, such as the cultural center, which they themselves have joined, as evidence that IMPA is completely unlike a capitalist workplace. These projects give them a greater sense of ownership and belonging. Their admiration for Murua could not stand in starker contrast to the critiques of their peers. They have a different conception of *autogestión* that they put into practice while resigning themselves to the fact that their co-workers do not follow their example.

It is important to recognize that both of these positions are invested in a particular notion of *autogestión*. The very plasticity and contradictory nature of this concept allows very different workers with very different habits to understand themselves as engaged in the same project. This contradictory nature is what led Lefebvre to claim that the focus on *autogestión* had simply become a “great outburst of confusion” (1976: 40). Similarly, it is the potentially contradictory status of *autogestión* that leads to the risk of degeneration to what Lefebvre called “co-management.” Confusion and the risk of co-management, however, are risks that come with a bottom-up struggle. And despite the top-down dynamics that I have highlighted here, IMPA remains an example of a bottom-up form *autogestión* is not controlled by the state or some larger political force. The fact that IMPA’s workers have been able to recuperate their factory and make a living is an impressive feat from any vantage point. Further, the fact that the workers understand themselves as engaging in *autogestión* makes fact this all the more compelling. As I argued above, the social relations of production are always in constant movement, and there are multiple examples of workers who push back against what they see as unfair or hypocritical policies. During my fieldwork, IMPA had been recuperated for 14 years, but it was working against 37 years of essentially private management. For those who spent the good part of their working lives in this environment, a full-scale democratic and participatory form of *autogestión* would be a radical change. In fact, a truly democratic and bottom-up form of *autogestión* would be a radical change for anyone, which is partly why *autogestión* should always be analyzed as a continual

struggle, both material and conceptual, to change the way in which we organize our lives.

I have focused on the production workers of IMPA here because they are absolutely central to the project both in terms of its economy and its legitimacy. Just like the other ERTs, much of IMPA's legitimacy comes from the fact that it was recuperated by its own workers. According to the public story, it is the same "strong metalworkers" who also opened up the factory to the community, creating a cultural center, a popular high school, a worker's university and other social projects. Thus, the respect that comes from being a worker, particularly in Argentina, is crucial to the larger political project. Yet, as much as it depends on the figure of "the worker," this larger project goes beyond this figure. The other social projects at IMPA also produce legitimacy. These projects demonstrate that IMPA offers the community more than work. It offers the community education, art, dance, music and even alternative media. The sheer existence of these social projects inside of a functioning metallurgical factory already hints at the radical change that *autogestión* can produce. It is to these projects that I turn to in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Producing a Subversive Geography: The Magic of IMPA

IMPA is a building that commands respect. Located in the middle of the city of Buenos Aires, this worker-recuperated enterprise is four stories tall and takes up the space of an entire city block. It is tucked away in a residential area of the neighborhood of Almagro, bordered on one side by the train tracks of the Sarmiento Line. Standing on the bridge over the tracks, one can see IMPA's impressive size and the towering sign that displays its familiar logo.⁹⁵ On the other side of the tracks there are brand new condominiums that present a stark contrast to IMPA's aged and worn appearance. During its peak of operation, when IMPA employed over a thousand workers, the train used to stop here, letting out those who commuted to the city from the western part the *Conurbano*. Today, IMPA employs only 47 workers and the train no longer stops at its door.

IMPA and the condominiums almost appear to be two worlds facing off across the train tracks. The condominiums represent the new luxurious urban lifestyle, offering the benefit of living in a historic Buenos Aires neighborhood with easy access to downtown and local shopping. The factory represents the industrial Argentina, the national-popular economic model of Perón, before the neoliberalism of the 1990s reshaped the urban landscape. But, of course, these are only appearances, and there is always more complex story happening underneath the surface. In reality, IMPA is not simply a holdover from a bygone era; it is not simply trying to hold its

⁹⁵ See figures 3.1 and 3.2.

ground while larger forces reshape the landscape. Instead, it is actively engaged in reshaping and remaking this landscape. Not only have IMPA's workers resisted eviction and recuperated the workplace, they have opened the factory to the community and developed novel social projects, such as a cultural center, a popular high school, independent radio and television stations and even a workers' university. These projects are not only located within a productive factory, which is novel in and of itself, but maintain relationships with the neighborhood, the city and the larger community. In this sense, IMPA produces new spaces that directly challenge the neoliberal fragmentation of space and society. Linking itself to the community in various ways through this unique sociospatial praxis, IMPA is able to produce a subversive geography that not only resists neoliberalism but also generates new potential alternatives to this hegemonic social order.

While the language and the analysis of a "subversive geography" is my own, the strategy that I focus on here is largely a self-conscious one. Since IMPA's takeover in 1998, it has intentionally and actively sought to involve the community and take advantage of the extra space in the factory created by a greatly diminished workforce. This is both a self-conscious "external" strategy that is aware of its own public image, a strategy to gain legitimacy in the public eye, and a self-conscious "internal" strategy to change the social relations of production and the meaning of work within IMPA. To a certain extent, the terms "external" and "internal" are misleading since the purpose of these social projects is to change the relationship of the factory to the community. By inviting the community inside the factory, the

activists of IMPA engage in a larger project that simultaneously transforms both the factory and the community in a dialectical process. Thus, even while most of my fieldwork and observations come from within the factory, I understand the term “subversive geography” in this broader, dialectical sense.

Whereas chapter two provided an analysis of the social relations of production among the production and administration workers, this chapter will take a broader look at IMPA as a larger political project. This will mean broadening my conception of *autogestión* from a term that refers to the workers’ cooperative to a term that includes the activists or “cultural workers” at IMPA. This usage of *autogestión* is consistent with its usage by local activists. In this chapter I seek to understand the extent to which IMPA succeeds in the task of integrating its different social projects and including them within a cohesive political project. Based on five months of participant observation of the cultural center, the popular high school, as well as insights gathered from a four-month ethnography of the workers’ cooperative, I analyze the way in which this movement not only occupies space but produces new geographies as it struggles to keep the factory. While IMPA has succeeded in producing dynamic social spaces, the project as a whole is marked by tension and fragmentation between these spaces. Specifically, the top-down organization of the workers’ cooperative⁹⁶ as well as the disconnect between the production workers and the other cultural projects weakens the cohesion of this sociospatial project,

⁹⁶ See chapter two for analysis of the social relations of production in the workers’ cooperative.

producing dynamic but fractured spaces. Before analyzing IMPA's spatial politics, however, I will make the case that IMPA represents a form of territorial activism. While the *piqueteros* are the classic example of a territorial social movement that operates in the neighborhood and understands its activism as a form of "territorial work," the ERTs have yet to be understood in this way. I will argue, however, that the ERTs, especially those like IMPA that are extensively involved in the community, are also territorial movements that engage in a form place-based resistance to the neoliberal fragmentation and restructuring of urban space.

Worker-Recuperated Enterprises as Territorial Activism

It is perhaps understandable that the occupied factories have usually been understood as labor or workplace-based struggles. The protagonists are taken to be the workers themselves and their goal has been to occupy and restart their own factories. And yet, these struggles have generally involved the larger community to some extent. ERTs became a popular phenomenon between 2001 and 2003 when the country faced its largest economic and political collapse as well as the first popular rebellion to remove a president, whether elected or unelected. Thus, workers were taking over factories at the same time that middle and working-class citizens began to form neighborhood assemblies and that *piquetero* movements were engaging in massive mobilizations, not only blocking highways but also showing solidarity with neighborhood assemblies and worker-occupied factories (Bielsa, 2002). In other words, most factories were occupied during a time of enormous social unrest, massive mobilization, deliberation and the formation of new political alliances among the

people. The famous slogan, “picket, pot, the struggle is the same” (*piquete, cacerola, la lucha es una sola*) came out of this unique moment where middle-class citizens and the unemployed saw themselves as allies in the same fight: “picket” refers the *piquetero* who was unemployed and “pot” refers to those in the streets banging on pots and pans who come from a middle class background. Although this unique solidarity across class lines would not last long, the alliances between factory workers, unemployed workers and middle-class citizens did matter for those who decided they had no other option than to take over their own factories while others were taking over the streets.

By understanding the ERTs and specifically IMPA as an example of territorial activism, I aim to contribute to a growing discussion of the spatial character of social movements. Specifically, I hope to broaden the discussion of how movements are producing space in novel and creative ways. As I argue in chapter one, the literature on social movements, although it has recently taken up space as an analytical category, has yet to account for how movements produce space. Even the literature that focuses on the right to the city and brings an explicitly spatial framework to the study of social movements has understood spatial strategies as ways of temporarily controlling urban areas. Scholars utilizing this framework are focusing on the ways that new movements are (1) “politicizing urban inhabitants in new ways; (2) [creating] *new alliances between labor, precarious urban workers, and right-to-the-city movements* that seek to transform these conditions; and (3) [engaging in] *new tactical and creative uses of urban space*” (Greenberg and Lewis, 2017: 10, emphasis

in original). Yet, organizations or movements that have achieved relatively permanent control of their own spaces have yet to be analyzed in this way. The ERTs are a good example of movements that have been able to control their own permanent space, and IMPA is an especially strong example of the way in which the production of space has brought together labor, cultural movements and local inhabitants in a different kind of challenge to urban space. The subversive quality of this challenge is less visible than “taking control” of a city, but has more profound implications when considered in terms of the politics of everyday life.

The literature on the ERTs has discussed this phenomenon as struggles that go beyond the workplace but it has not specifically theorized them as spatial struggles. Marcelo Vieta (2010), for example, has discussed the unique “social innovations” that ERTs have developed.⁹⁷ These innovations demonstrate a logic that goes beyond the logic of capitalism. One of the innovations Vieta describes is the “*rediscovery of notions of social wealth*, opening up the workplaces to the community and strengthening the social value of these worker self-managed workspaces” (3, emphasis in original). While Vieta provides examples of ERTs that have opened parts of their factories to the community and recognizes the way in which this strategy provides legitimacy or social capital to the enterprises, he does not analyze this as a spatial strategy that seeks to resist the neoliberal fragmentation of society and change the social relations of production within the factory. More importantly, in the cases where enterprises have opened themselves to the community, he does not

⁹⁷ He borrows this term from Andres Ruggeri.

provide an analysis of how this affects or alters the dynamic of *autogestión* within the factory. Without further analysis, we are not able to see that these innovations or spatial strategies are not simply something extra but projects that produce new identities and relationships between the factories and their surrounding neighborhoods.

Methodology

My analysis in this chapter is based on five months of participant observation of the cultural center at IMPA, four of which I spent as a production worker. I describe my time as a production worker as an ethnography of the workers' cooperative, but my study of the cultural center as a form of participant observation. While some use the language of participant observation and ethnography interchangeably, I borrow from Karen O'Reilly who identifies certain cases in which participant observation cannot be considered ethnography since they do not involve total immersion in a social situation (2012: 113). In my overall study of IMPA, then, I intentionally privileged the workers' cooperative because this would give me the most "bottom-up" perspective. I sensed that the production workers were at the bottom of a social structure, even if this structure claimed to be "horizontal" and "autonomous." Tellingly, it is not the production workers who tell visitors that the IMPA is horizontal or autonomous, and this is the point from which my analysis begins, both for this chapter on the spatial dynamics of IMPA as well as for my chapter on the social relations of production.

My participant observation of the cultural center and the popular high school consisted of attending selected events, such as plays, workshops or community events. At these events I got to know the participants who were members of the cultural center or popular high school or simply members of the public. Those who were in charge of the cultural center I got to know quickly and they knew about my participation in the workers' cooperative. However, since I did not 'join' the cultural center or popular high school in the same way that I 'joined' the workers' cooperative, I did not form tight bonds with any of the members with the exception of Guzmán, a member of the popular high school who occasionally worked for a few hours in the *prensa* section of the workers' cooperative.

My decision to privilege the bottom-up perspective, however, had a limiting effect on my ability to study the other cultural projects at IMPA. On a regular workday, I was often too exhausted to stay and observe dynamics at the cultural center, which would begin two to three hours after the work shift ended. Thus, while I visited several workshops of the cultural center, I never became a consistent participant of any particular workshop that the cultural center offered. I also never attended an assembly of the cultural center or the popular high school. Instead, I observed these projects in their more public moments. Since the cultural center is a more public project than the popular high school, I learned more about the cultural center. However, when the cultural center and the popular high school collaborated to put on public events, such as the *Milongeñas*, these served as occasions to observe both at the same time and to see how these entities collaborated.

In a certain sense, my decision to privilege the workers' cooperative made me more like the typical production worker at IMPA. These are workers I describe in chapter two that generally do not participate in the cultural center or other cultural projects. Of course, this is for a variety of reasons but one of them is simply time. The production workers do not have the time and energy to participate in something "extra." In a certain way, I became one of these workers. In another sense, of course, there is a gulf between these workers and the cultural projects that is, ironically enough, cultural. That is, most of the production workers do not have the cultural practice of engaging in activism, workplace or otherwise. Needless to say, I do not share this cultural separation, and in fact, because I understood my condition as a worker as temporary, I was able to justify my absence to myself since I knew that I could always participate in events or interview members later on in order to gain a better understanding.

The notion that the cultural projects at IMPA are "extra" labor or some kind of "extracurricular" activity brings up all kinds of questions about the relationship between these projects, such as: why are the workers' cooperative and cultural projects conceived as different projects that have different members and operate at different times? Why is the cultural center understood as optional, unpaid activism, while production is considered mandatory, salaried work? This question is especially relevant given the claim I analyze below that cultural center activists are "cultural workers." Finally, if the production workers bear the brunt of most of the hard labor at IMPA, what do the activists at IMPA do to reach out to these workers and change

the social dynamics between them? While I address this final question to some extent in this chapter, for the most part these questions are difficult, if not impossible, to pose to the participants themselves. Although IMPA as a whole has a particular identity, it is understood as being made up separate projects, a point to which I return below.

Finally, my particular method of having become a “regular worker” also highlights the significant difference between regular workers and what I call “activist workers,” those production workers who also participate in the cultural center. What I discovered in my interviews with these workers is that this phenomenon can be explained through identity. The identity of the “activist workers” is one that destabilizes the distinctions between the workers’ cooperative and the cultural center. Yet, this identity does not challenge the distinction between activism as optional and unpaid and production work as salaried, mandatory labor. Significantly, the phenomenon of the activist worker can also be explained through geography, since two out of three of these workers live walking distance from IMPA. In many ways, the activist workers are the exception to the rule, but to understand the rule we have to do an analysis of IMPA as a spatial project.

IMPA’s Subversive Geography

As I argue above, IMPA’s spatial strategy is one that is conscious and aware of its own public image. Eduardo Murua, the de facto leader of IMPA, is well aware that it is difficult to make an argument to legalize a recuperated factory that employs less than five percent of its original workforce. Thus, the tactic of opening the factory

to the community is both a novel idea as well as a pragmatic strategy and a necessity for survival. Although this strategy is presented as both an external and internal strategy by the administration, I found that, except for the “worker activists,” the activists at IMPA were largely resigned to the fact it is mostly an external strategy for public legitimacy. As I point out above, however, the external strategy is also an internal strategy since opening up the factory allows the community to transform it from the inside. In this sense, the cultural center, popular high school and various other cultural projects do transform a space that had been previously designated solely for production and create something new. In what follows, I describe the politics and tensions of this novel sociospatial project.

IMPA is so large that it takes several visits to comprehend its many dimensions. As described above, IMPA houses a functioning worker’s cooperative alongside various social projects. Of course, the productive element used to fill the entire space. However, due to the massive reduction of workers that occurred mostly during the years before the takeover in 1998, the productive space has been vastly reduced. Today, the productive process takes up part of the first and second floor. And while the factory houses many new social projects, there are still vast expanses that simply contain old, silent and inoperative machines. The office of the cultural center, which used to occupy a small office room on the second floor, now occupies a larger complex of offices on the first floor. Beyond its office, however, the cultural center has access to several large and open spaces on the third floor, the old cafeteria on the fourth floor, a theater known as *Teatro Nora Cortiñas*, as well as a bar, located

on the second floor. The Popular High School operates on the fourth floor where they have access to a complex of offices that they have converted into several classrooms and a library. The independent media projects, *Barricada TV* and *Radio Semilla*, operate out of converted offices also located on the fourth floor. Finally, the *Universidad de los Trabajadores* occupies several large and open spaces on the first floor on the eastern side of the building that has its own separate entrance.⁹⁸ Even with the development of these projects, however, there are still large ‘empty’ spaces at IMPA filled with silent and inoperative machines

The Cultural Center

In terms of IMPA’s public identity, the most important of these projects is the cultural center (*Centro Cultural IMPA*). The cultural center has the function of being the interface with the larger community. Someone who is unaffiliated with IMPA is able to visit the factory only because the representatives of the cultural center are there in the afternoon to welcome and orient them to IMPA. These representatives tell visitors about IMPA’s history, explaining that IMPA is still engaged in production while being open to the community. They tell visitors about the different social projects at IMPA and explain the different workshops that the center offers, such as: tango, *candombe*, folklore, guitar, *fileteado porteño* and many others.⁹⁹ Perhaps predictably, these representatives describe IMPA in glowing terms. For example, they make sure to explain that in the 1940s IMPA used to manufacture the

⁹⁸ This project was only getting started while I was conducting fieldwork in 2012.

⁹⁹ See figure 3.4.

Pulqui, Argentina's most important warplane. As I explain in the previous chapter, these representatives attribute the worker takeover in 1998 to the strength of IMPA's metalworkers, and they describe IMPA as a horizontal and self-managed (*autogestionado*) political project in which all workers are paid equally. For those who want to know and see more, these representatives also give a tour of the cultural center.¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, the cultural center is the face of IMPA, representing and translating the entire social project to local and international visitors alike.¹⁰¹ This is particularly significant when one considers how different this kind of presentation is from what a regular production worker at IMPA might say to a visitor. But apart from the workers who manage the door, it is unlikely that a visitor will even see any of the productive workers, much less meet them or hear their perspective.

Although the cultural center performs the work of connecting IMPA to the community, it remains disconnected from the productive workers. As I explain in chapter two, there are only three productive workers who enthusiastically participate in the cultural center, what I call "activist workers," but the rest are either neutral or passively for or against it. The fact that the center operates in a separate space and at a different time of day probably helps these two entities almost ignore one another. And yet, because they share some spaces as well as a larger political project, tension

¹⁰⁰ This is a tour specifically of the spaces of the cultural center. Visitors are not shown the spaces of production or other parts of the factory.

¹⁰¹ While I initially met the representatives of the cultural center in 2011, upon first arriving at IMPA, I got another chance to observe the way in which they present the factory to visitors when one of my advisors visited IMPA in 2012. When I gave my advisor and a group of her colleagues a tour of IMPA that included the productive sectors, we ran into a representative of the cultural center who was very surprised that I had gotten permission to show them these sectors.

between the two remain. The activists of the center do, however, maintain a consistent working relationship with IMPA's administrative council,¹⁰² but it is clear that this is a subordinate relationship in which Murua and the rest of the council set the terms of engagement. Ultimately, this disconnection from the worker cooperative and vertical relationship with the cooperative council compromises the project of changing social relations within the factory and creating a cohesive larger political project and identity.

Although IMPA can be seen as a political project that connects the struggles of its workers to the needs and demands of the larger community, it is uniquely different from a typical example of labor or union activism. Walking into the cultural center, for example, is quite unlike walking into a union office. While the representatives of the cultural center do not reject the label of "activist" (*activista* or *militante*) they identify principally as "artists" and also as "workers" or more specifically as "cultural workers." Although IMPA was still fighting for their right to keep the factory during my fieldwork, there was no visible fight or struggle happening. Rather than going to a march or protest, the way to support IMPA during this time was to attend a workshop or the screening of a play or, in other words, to inhabit and participate in IMPA's subversive geography. At the very most, one could actually join the cultural center or one of the many other social projects and participate as a member by teaching a particular workshop, going to meetings and

¹⁰² I argue in chapter two that the cooperative council actually makes most of the important decisions at IMPA despite the cultural center's claims of horizontalism and self-management.

interfacing with the administration. Yet, IMPA was not “recruiting” activists in the traditional sense. In fact, the kind of encouragement I got from the cultural center representatives was that I should start attending the workshops because it would be fun. I was told stories about other young people who had visited from European countries and started taking workshops at IMPA and ended up simply staying in Buenos Aires and making it their home. Very different from the urgency that is typical of an activist frame of mind, these artists were clearly enjoying the fact that they had a space to do the kind of work they wanted to do. Their goal was more about finding participants or audience members rather than recruiting activists or volunteers.

One gets a similar introduction to IMPA when attending the plays that the cultural center frequently offers. After purchasing their ticket, the audience assembles on the first floor where a participant of the cultural center explains a little bit about IMPA’s past and present. First, the audience is told that IMPA is a factory that is still in operation, a fact that is usually unknown to first-time visitors. Then, they are told about the worker takeover in 1998, the creation of the cultural center and other social projects. The activists align themselves publicly with the workers by describing themselves as “cultural workers.” The identification as a cultural worker allows these representatives to present IMPA as a horizontal social project in which cultural and productive labor are valued equally. They put forth a vision in which these two distinct ways of participating are both equally recognized as forms of “work.” Yet, there are very significant differences between these groups in terms of

social class, age, level of education and geographic location. The activists of the cultural center are principally young, middle class, with some level of higher education and usually live within the city of Buenos Aires. The productive workers, on the other hand, are obviously working class but also significantly older, often do not have a high school degree and usually live in the outer reaches of the *Conurbano*. If one factors in the kind of labor that each performs, then there is no comparison. The productive workers not only perform routine, repetitive, manual labor, but also depend on their salaries to survive. Moreover, these workers sacrificed a great deal simply to keep IMPA functioning after the takeover in 1998. In the first thirteen years after the takeover, the productive workers barely earned enough to pay for the commute, let alone to pay their bills. Consequently, during this time many moved back in with their parents or other family members. Thus, while the cultural center activists would like to establish an equivalence between cultural and productive labor, it is clear that there are vast differences in privilege and social status between the cultural worker and the productive worker at IMPA.

As part of this introduction to IMPA, the activists of the cultural center emphasize the fact that IMPA's productive workers were spatially constrained under the old form of operation, but after the takeover they are able to freely move about the factory. They point out that in the old form of production, before the worker takeover, the workers had colored uniforms that corresponded to the sector in which they worked. Once again, this claim exaggerates the extent to which the social relations of production have been transformed. Although it is true that the workers no

longer wear colored uniforms that match their section and are no longer tethered to their posts, in my time as a ‘worker’ I rarely saw workers from different sections socialize with each other. In fact, one worker complained to me that IMPA used to provide lunch to its employees in the cafeteria, where workers from different sectors could eat together. The current practice is for workers to eat their lunches and take their breaks in little groups with coworkers from their own sector, usually breaking up further along lines of friendship.¹⁰³ Occasionally, the workers organize a barbeque on Fridays, but even these larger social moments are restricted to each sector. The apparently newfound “spatial freedom” of the workers seems to have resulted in a fractured social space in which even the productive workers are separated among themselves, rather than a unified social space that brings together cultural and productive workers. In this instance, the social relations of the workers are more closely aligned with neoliberal fragmentation than they are with a new kind of liberated productive space.

The cultural center’s claims regarding a new social space are especially ironic when seen from the perspective of the production workers. When I asked the production workers about their opinion of the cultural center, many supported it or took a neutral position. However, this position was usually prefaced by the claim that it was not until the cultural center got out of the productive spaces of the factory that they were able to tolerate its presence. Through these discussions I learned that when

¹⁰³ One worker even told me directly that he preferred the old system of production in which refreshments were occasionally brought directly to the shop floor.

the cultural center began, it attempted to share the spaces designated for production. According to the stories of the productive workers, there were so many theater and art supplies crowding the shop floor that the workers had difficulty running the machines. Thus, rather than transforming the productive work space and qualitatively changing the social relations of production, the activists cultural center were simply crowding out the production workers. When a group of production workers organized a counter-occupation at IMPA in 2005, they expressed their rejection of the cultural center and Murua's leadership by throwing the theater and art supplies out of the windows of the factory (Ruggeri, 2005).¹⁰⁴ These examples show that it is the spatial separation between cultural and productive work spaces rather than their integration that has allowed the cultural center to survive at IMPA.

One issue that came up during my ethnography of the workers' cooperative was a project of the cultural center to renovate the bathrooms on the second floor. These are the main bathrooms of the workers' cooperative that the production workers use for getting dressed before and after work. The activists of the cultural center had raised 12,000 pesos for the project of fixing up the bathrooms. In my discussions with members of the cultural center as well as in conversation with Murua and Castillo, this was presented as evidence that the cultural center did engage and "give back" to the cooperative. However, many production workers were much more skeptical about this kind of giving back. A pair of production workers pointed out that the activists of the cultural center also used these bathrooms, implying that

¹⁰⁴ I describe this counter-occupation further in chapter two.

the gesture more self-interested than it was generous. Marta, another production worker, was even more skeptical, telling me that they did not even have a decent lighting system at her work station while the theater had an entire lighting system. Thus, one of the best and most concrete arguments on the part of the cultural activists that they were involved and engaged with the workers' cooperative was easily dismissed by the same productive workers that they hoped to impress.

By providing counter-arguments to the claims of the cultural center, I am not implying that IMPA has failed to produce unique spaces. To the contrary, I am arguing that IMPA has indeed produced a subversive geography, but this geography is not without its own tensions and contradictions. Further, it is clear that this new geography is not the integrated and egalitarian space that the cultural center representatives claim it to be. In fact, the cultural center and the other social projects at IMPA are made possible by the 'extra space' at IMPA that used to be occupied by other productive workers. It is the space between productive workers and "cultural workers" rather than the space that these groups share that allows for these projects to co-exist. I contend that IMPA succeeds as a sociospatial project not because all the projects share the same space but because they have space to use, space in which to spread out. This is space as extension or even as separation, as opposed to a transformed, integrated and egalitarian work space.

From the *Patria Metalúrgica* to the *Patria Chiquitita*

While IMPA's activists have struggled to make authentic connections with the productive workers, they have mostly succeeded in establishing a connection to the

larger community, through their connection to the neighborhood. The presence of both a cultural center and a popular high school inside the factory creates a completely novel dynamic in which community members are constantly coming in and out of what used to be a traditional workplace where only productive workers and administrators had business. These community members include the activists of the cultural center, the participants of the workshops, audience members of plays and other community events, the teachers of the popular high school as well as the students and their parents. While the popular high school offers classes to youth as well as adults, most of the students are working-class youth from the neighborhood of Almagro. Of all those who participate in IMPA's social projects, these young people are perhaps the most local as well as the most directly affected by the recuperation of IMPA apart from the productive workers themselves. If it was not for this activist project, these students would most likely not be able to earn a high school degree. For these students, then, the recuperation of the workplace has meant the recuperation of their education.

Beyond the regular activists and participants in these projects, IMPA regularly hosts larger events that draw a substantial public who become part of a larger circle of those involved with IMPA. These events include monthly parties, co-hosted by the cultural center and the popular high school, known as *Milongeñas*.¹⁰⁵ At the *Milongeñas* the teacher and participants of the tango workshop put on a public

¹⁰⁵ These events are named after *milonga*, which is a genre of tango music that is more fast-paced than tango.

display of tango followed by a free tango class open to everyone present. Often the event is accompanied by live music. While the *Milongueña* centers the tango workshop, participants from the entire cultural center and popular high school would volunteer and participate. For example, the participants of the shirt-printing workshop along with students from the popular high school would sell their prints and t-shirts at the door. These were prints that they had made together, since these students were regular participants in the shirt-printing workshop. Others contribute by helping to prepare or selling the food and beverages. Among the many kinds of different events held at IMPA, this monthly celebration is unique in the way that it brings the activists and participants of the cultural center and popular high school together with the general public.

The *Milongueña*, however, is only one of the many kinds of public events held at IMPA. There is a large range of public events ranging from celebrations to political acts or meetings. For example, one event I attended was a round-table discussion on the negative effect of monopolies in Argentina.¹⁰⁶ This event was clearly inspired by the issue of media monopolies, which in 2012 was a very public issue because of the national media law (*ley de medios*) being promoted by the government of Cristina Kirchner. This law targeted Clarín as a media monopoly and, ultimately, limited the number of media outlets that Clarín and other companies could own. IMPA's event sought to ride on the coattails of the anti-monopoly sentiment and broaden the public's awareness of how many monopolies existed by hosting a

¹⁰⁶ See figure 3.4 below.

discussion among several activists. The slogan on the poster for the event was “Relax Clarín, we’re not going to leave you alone” (*Clarín, tranquilo, not ve vamos a dejar solo*). The graphic at the top features tombstones for different monopolies. The tombstone for Clarín is featured in front with the date of its death as the day the media law went into effect. The tombstones in the background feature the logos of other monopolies such as: Telefonica, Arcor, Monsanto, Carrefour and especially important for IMPA’s context, Aluar. Aluar is a provider of aluminum, the primary material that IMPA uses for all of its products. The “anti-monopoly party” advertised by the poster was a demonstration by many of the workshops from the cultural center, including: Candombe,¹⁰⁷ Silks and Trapeze Acrobatics (*Tela y Trepacio*), Brazilian Percussion (*Percusión Tumba La Tá Ritmos Brasileños*), and an experimental theater group known as *Impacto Teatral*. Other members of the cultural center contributed by helping to set up, selling the drinks and so forth. This event, just like many of IMPA’s events and celebrations, was done completely in-house. Not only did IMPA host the event, but all of the entertainment and the manpower required to throw the party were taken from within IMPA’s social projects.

The fact that IMPA occupies such a vast and diverse space and the fact that it can host its own parties and provide its own entertainment leads to the development of a unique identity among the activists. In a video produced by *Barricada TV* there is a short clip of a representative from the cultural center who makes reference to “an

¹⁰⁷ This is a drumming style that originates from enslaved Africans. It is especially popular in Uruguay.

economic model that destroys.” Then he says, “And we, from this small space, from this little homeland (*patria chiquitita*), try to resist that.”¹⁰⁸ This is a very rich statement because it brings space and identity together. In other words, it is through space that IMPA understands itself and produces its identity. If we put this statement together with another statement from the video from the same member it further illuminates this point: “beyond the politics and the beyond the ideologies, IMPA is an ideology unto itself.”¹⁰⁹ Of course, rather than understanding this comment at face value – the idea that IMPA and the activists within it are not influenced by popular leftist ideologies or the notion that IMPA has somehow invented its own ideology – I read this statement as an extension of the comment about space. The control and production of space becomes a way of avoiding questions of ideology that can become divisive or sectarian. The little homeland itself becomes something that unites the members and activists around a common identity. Thus, not only is IMPA’s resistance to neoliberalism rooted in maintaining and producing space, but its identity is rooted in this space as well, a characteristic that allows it to partially get around the divisive question of ideology. This means that one does not need to pick between Socialism, Communism, or Peronism; one simply participates or joins in building the “little homeland.”

¹⁰⁸ Original: Un modelo económico que destruye...Y nosotros desde este espacio chiquitito, de esta patria chiquitita, tratamos de resistir eso.

¹⁰⁹ Original: más allá de políticas y más allá de tendencias o ideologías, IMPA es una ideología en sí misma.

IMPA's size and diversity directly contributes to the development of this identity. Not many other ERTs could even consider thinking of themselves as a "little homeland." Most ERTs have very few workers and while some have opened themselves to the community, none have done so to the extent that IMPA has. Seen from this angle, IMPA's size and diversity allows it to have its own production sector, its own media, its own education system, its own cultural sector and even its own 'little nationalism.' While this is an impressive feat for any grassroots organization, this apparently self-sustaining structure could also be partly responsible for reinforcing Murua's top-down leadership style and his frequent clashes with other ERTs.¹¹⁰

IMPA's identity as a *patria chiquitita* (little homeland) is reinforced not only by its impressive size and the variety of functions it serves, but also by its cultural activists who have cultivated a special relationship to the space itself. These activists talk about the spaces of IMPA in endearing terms. The documentary by *Barricada TV* mentioned above begins with these four activists describing IMPA:

[1] Those of us here at the cultural center want to talk about the magic of IMPA. The magic comes from its scents all the way up to the relationships we establish. They are not cold relationships, but rather if there is a rehearsal we take out the *mate* [for example]. That is, from within the conditions we have we try to treat each other as *compañeros*. [2] I feel an enormous attraction to IMPA that has to do on the one hand with its architecture, with what the space itself emanates from the moment you walk in the door: its scents, its colors. [3] It is about the fact that IMPA has an architecture that is unique for this type of performance or artistic activities. [4] One feels better, doing plays in this place. You know that that something is multiplying, and that the

¹¹⁰ Although IMPA has taken an active role in helping to occupy and recuperate other ERTs, since its recuperation in 1998, and continues to participate in the National Movement of Recuperated Enterprises (*Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas*, or MNER), Murua's leadership style has alienated many, leading them to criticize what they see as a go-it-alone approach to organizing.

force of the workers [is present] as well – the workers that we have, the *compañeros* that accompany the struggle, and the idea is to generate a cultural identity that is much more rich.¹¹¹

These testimonies show that it is not just that IMPA has enough space, but that it is a particular kind of space that produces a certain magic or mystique. These characteristics are presented as elements that are not superficial or added on but embedded within the space; two speakers, for example, reference IMPA's scents and two reference its architecture. Both of these characteristics seem to reference IMPA's long history, presumably a history of work and workers' struggles. The final speaker directly references the workers and the struggle. His claim that "something is multiplying" highlights not only the simultaneous struggles of the production workers and the activists but also their convergence. Indeed, he ends with the claim that they are generating a richer "cultural identity." This claim, however, is ambiguous. From the perspective of the community, IMPA's cultural center certainly generates a richer cultural identity.¹¹² If the claim, however, is that the cultural center enriches this

¹¹¹ Original: "Nosotros desde el centro cultural queremos hablar de magia de IMPA. La magia va desde sus olores hasta relaciones que establecemos. No una relación fría, si no si hay un ensayo de sacar mate. Ósea, dentro de las condiciones que tenemos tratamos como compañeros... Yo siento que IMPA genera una enorme atracción que tiene que ver por un lado desde su arquitectura, con lo que el espacio mismo emana desde que entras, sus olores, sus colores... Es una cuestión que IMPA tiene de por sí que es su arquitectura que es única. Ósea, para este tipo de performance o de actividades artísticas... Uno se siente mejor, haciendo obras en este lugar. Sabes que hay algo que se está multiplicando, y que lo da la fuerza de los trabajadores también que tenemos compañeros que acompañan la lucha y la idea es generar una identidad cultural mucho más rica."

¹¹² I would add that this is especially the case of those workshops that teach and help to salvage historically Argentine expressions and art forms, such as: *Fileteado Porteño*, *Folklore*, *Tango*, and *Candombe*. Of course, to the extent that immigration from other Latin American countries to Argentina increases, workshops on Andean, Brazilian or Colombian traditions become more relevant.

cultural identity by bringing culture to the workers' struggle then this would be more controversial as so few of the production workers participate in this activism.

The feelings that these activists have developed for the space of IMPA are in many ways legitimate but they also overly romanticize the space and the presumed connection it gives them to the production workers. Of course, we can and should take these activists at their word when they talk about their personal attraction to the space or explain how that the space allows them to develop closer relationships. We should also trust their artistic sensibility when they talk about the way IMPA provides a unique architecture for plays and other art forms. But their attraction to IMPA's scents, its architecture and its magic, is just as much an attraction and a fascination the kind of work they perform in the space. The production workers, who are tethered to machines all day, smell different smells and experience a different architecture. Finally, the way the activists tie this special feeling or magic to sharing a space with the production workers only exposes their distance from those same workers who never use such words in their descriptions of IMPA.

Indeed, this collective identity, which is rooted in space and reinforced by the cultural production of the cultural center and the independent media projects, breaks down when it reaches the production workers. Not only do many workers not identify with the idea of a *patria chiquitita*, but many are baffled that people continue to even use the name "IMPA." During my ethnography of the workers' cooperative, I encountered several workers who wondered out-loud why people continued to use the name "IMPA" when the cooperative's official name is *Cooperativa 22 de Mayo*.

“IMPA went bankrupt” one worker angrily told me. “They don’t let it die” said another, referring to the signs all over the factory. For many of the production workers, the *Cooperativa 22 de Mayo* is what has allowed them to recuperate their factory and get their jobs back. For those who participate in the cultural projects, *Cooperativa 22 de Mayo* only exists on paper.¹¹³ It is ironic that the name “IMPA” interpellates everyone except the production workers, especially when these workers are the central figure of struggle and resistance at IMPA.¹¹⁴ Given these fundamental differences, one could even say that the workers and the activists belong to different enterprises.

This social stratification can be read back into the space through a social analysis of IMPA’s architecture. This social analysis reveals production workers on the first and second floors, cultural activists on the second and third floors, administration workers and educational and media activists on the fourth floor. At the front door there is a large sign that displays the name IMPA prominently, and on top of the factory there is a large sign that displays IMPA’s name, which also functions as IMPA’s logo.¹¹⁵ The media activists of *Barricada TV* and *Radio Semilla* also control the airwaves that emanate from IMPA while the activists of the cultural center run IMPA’s email list and Facebook page, in keeping with their role of interfacing with the community. Another figure might be said to inhabit the darker

¹¹³ This relationship to the name also exposes the different relationship to these two groups have to IMPA’s history.

¹¹⁴ For example, in figure 3.2 one can see that all of the characters in the images of “culture,” “work,” “resistance,” and “education” are dressed and presented as production workers.

¹¹⁵ See figure 3.2. This logo is also in the background of figure 3.4.

regions among the silent and inoperative machines: ghosts.¹¹⁶ In general, activists and administrators operate on higher floors and in open spaces or clean offices whereas the production workers operate on lower floors and in spaces that are clogged with machines.¹¹⁷ This spatial stratification that roughly corresponds to the social hierarchy at IMPA provides us with a more critical reading of the architecture that the cultural activists tend to idealize.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ There are rumors among the workers that IMPA is haunted. In fact, IMPA was featured on a popular television show *Impacto 9* (no pun intended) which investigated these claims (2012). The best evidence from their visit to IMPA is a photograph that appears to show the silhouette of a profile of a person. Half of the program is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_xvyVmyQt&ab_channel=christiandeluganoo I also had an exchange with one of the workers that hints at the issue of why IMPA might be haunted. The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes: “11/20/12: Esther’s dream. Esther told us that she had a dream that they were all working in a different sector where they used to work, everyone facing the same direction, as if they were on a bus, when Juancito appeared. Juancito was a former co-worker who retired and had an agreement with the coop that they were going to give him some money during his retirement. The coop gave him \$ for 2 or 3 months and then stopped. It turned out that he died soon afterwards. (Apparently, this pattern has happened frequently). Anyway, he came back and said that he won his lawsuit, and everybody was really happy for him, shaking his hand giving him hugs. The last part of the dream that Esther remembers so clearly is Juancito hugging her, giving her a kiss and then looking at Juancito as tears of happiness roll down his face and he says that he won that he finally won. “What could the lawsuit have been?” she asks. Marta says that she wishes that they (meaning the administration) would have these kinds of dreams – nightmares I add – and she emphatically agrees. But they don’t care, she says. They’re “cruel” (now in a different context – talking about how they don’t pay retirement or they do for a bit and then just forget about it) – and in fact this fits with their strategy of trying to tire people out – which they did with Antonio and what they’re currently doing with Diego. An intentional strategy of not responding, of taking too much time, until the other party gets too tired to fight them.”

¹¹⁷ Of course, there are exceptions to this. For example, during my fieldwork the cultural center moved its office downstairs from the second floor to the first, but in doing so also acquired much more space.

¹¹⁸ An excessively cynical reading of the *patria chiquitita* might observe that IMPA appears to have its own working class, middle class and political class, complete with political connections between the leaders and the media.

Figure 3.1: The Sarmiento Line dividing IMPA (left) from new condominiums.



Figure 3.2: IMPA's sign and logo.



Figure 3.3: The mural at IMPA's front door.



The sign reads: "IMPA: The Factory: Cultural City: Struggle Work and Culture." The four panels read: "Culture, Work, Resistance, Education."

Figure 3.4: A digital flyer for the workshops of the cultural center. From an email received 9/19/12.

que TALLERES hay en

MARTES

DANZA COLOMBIANA	15:30
CONSTR. TAMBORES	18:30
TELA Y TRAPECIO	19:00
FOTOGRAFÍA BASICO	19:00
FOLKLORE	20:00

MIÉRCOLES

TELA Y TRAPECIO	15:00
CANDOMBE	18:00
SERIGRAFIA	18:30
FOTOGRAFÍA BASICO	19:00
CANTO CON CAJA	19:00
TANGO	20:00
GUITARRA	20:00

JUEVES

CANTO	19:00
SERIGRAFIA	18:30
FOTOGRAF. AVANZADO	19:00

VIERNES

TELA Y TRAPECIO	15:00
ENCUADERNACIÓN	18:00
PERCUS. TUMBA LA TÁ	18_30
CAMARA DE VIDEO (8 CLASES)	19:00

SÁBADOS

MASCARAS Y CASQUETES	10:00
HISTORIETA	11:00
FOTOGRAFIA CREATIVA	11:00
DANZA AFRO	11:00
MASCARAS (NIÑOS/AS)	14:00
SIKUS - MUS. ANDINA	15:00

lafabricacultura@yahoo.com.ar
querandíes 4290 / tel:4981-3730 facebook: IMPALAFABRICA

Figure 3.5: The poster for the anti-monopoly presentation and party.



Poster reads: Clarín, calm down, we are not going to leave you by yourself. The others will accompany you in the great cemetery of the monopolies. And on your graves the people will dance. Yes, we the people, that you used and invisibilized: the voiceless, the poor that bother you so much, will dance and sing on your graves.

Figure 3.6: An old an inoperative machine that has been transformed into art.



Figure 3.7: A scene from the silks and trapeze (*tela y trepacio*) workshop. One can observe how the high ceiling works in the favor of these activists and community members.



Conclusion

IMPA's subversive geography represents an enormous achievement that has yet to be explored by literature that focuses on social movements and space or even work that emphasizes the right to the city. Often this work emphasizes moments where movements take over cities but usually in the form of occupations that are temporary. Those movements that have occupied and produced more stable and permanent spaces have yet to be analyzed specifically as forms of spatial politics. I have argued that the ERTs in Argentina are a form of spatial politics that resist neoliberal forms of fragmentation. Further, the case of IMPA is one in which spatial politics is on full display. While other scholars have observed the ways in which ERTs open their enterprises to the community, they have not analyzed this as a spatial politics. At IMPA, where activists refer to it as a "little homeland" and the sign at the door refers to it as a "cultural city," a spatial identity and politics is palpable.

My account emphasizes the way that IMPA stands in stark contrast to the forces of neoliberal fragmentation but also complicates this argument. The recuperation of work, of employment, is a counter-narrative of its own in the Argentina of the late 1990s. However, IMPA recuperated not only employment but also forms of cultural activism. By opening up the factory to the community, IMPA also fought neoliberal forms of fragmentation, segregation and gentrification. This "opening up," however, is only the beginning. We have to analyze the way that IMPA brings these classes together, the way in which they produce space. This is, after all, what makes these cultural projects so unique. Without the workers'

cooperative IMPA would simply be an activist community space. While the cultural projects are part of a strategy to legitimize IMPA in the public eye, the entire project, in some ways, rests on the legitimacy of the production workers.¹¹⁹ The fact that the project of integrating these groups into one political project with a shared identity has proved even more difficult than recuperating employment is a fact worth noting if we are concerned with the limits of popular movements today.

While the challenges of integrating the various social projects within IMPA remain, the “external” project, the project transforming the community at large and *barrio* of Almagro is very much a living project. One must recognize that the simple existence of IMPA is a victory in the face of gentrification. Judging by what has happened to *El Mercado de Abasto*,¹²⁰ or in neighborhoods all across Buenos Aires, including *Boedo* just across the train tracks, IMPA could easily be a shopping mall or tower of condominiums. The cultural projects within IMPA also benefit the community in many, unquantifiable ways. When community members come into IMPA to see a play and learn that it is a worker-recuperated enterprise, it broadens their political imaginary; it connects them to their culture and history and allows them to imagine new possibilities. To the extent that IMPA’s subversive geography becomes part of people’s rhythms and routines it has an effect on their experience of

¹¹⁹ The production worker is the central figure of resistance not only because they have sacrificed the most, giving them the most legitimacy, but because of Argentina’s political culture in general. This has been in place ever since the time of Perón when the *pueblo* (people) became the *pueblo trabajador* (working people). See (James, 1988, especially pp. 14-21).

¹²⁰ A former fruit and vegetable market in central Buenos Aires that has been transformed into a shopping mall.

everyday life. It is a phenomenon that goes beyond protests or temporary occupations, and, in this sense, the activists of the cultural center are right when they say that it goes beyond ideology.

Chapter Four

“Things are won in the street”: Neoliberal Workfare and the Battle for *Autogestión*

<i>Vengo del 20 de Diciembre</i>	I come from the 20th of December
<i>Vengo del Puente Pueyrredón</i>	I come from the Pueyrredón Bridge
<i>Somos la izquierda independiente</i>	We are the independent left
<i>Peleano por la revolución</i>	Fighting for the revolution
<i>Porque vamos a luchar</i>	We are going to struggle
<i>Nos vamos a organizar</i>	We are going to organize
<i>Contra todos los punteros de los K</i>	Against all the brokers of the Kirchners
<i>Con el poder popular</i>	With popular power
<i>En la calle resistir</i>	Resisting in the streets
<i>Desde abajo y a la izquierda construir</i>	Constructing from below and to the left

I heard this song, set to the tune of Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Bad Moon,” every time I marched with the Frente de Organizaciones en Lucha (FOL), a national unemployed workers’ or *piquetero* movement located mostly in the Greater Buenos Aires area. These song lyrics above are a good example of how the FOL performs and constructs their militant collective identity. The lyrics narrate a history that begins with the 20th of December 2001, the more radical and militant day of the two-day popular uprising that ousted President Fernando de la Rúa, and the 26th of June 2002, when Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki were assassinated in a massive *piquetero* march that attempted to cross the Pueyrredón bridge from the province into the city of Buenos Aires. After rooting their identity in this militant history, they go on to describe what it means to be a part of the “independent left” today. According to the song, the independent left constructs popular power through struggle and organization from below and, importantly, “against all of the political brokers of the Kirchners.” This combative stance against the self-described “progressive” Kirchner

government is especially puzzling if one considers the fact that the FOL uses government resources to fund its own projects in the neighborhoods in which it is based. How can we understand the FOL's oppositional stance in light of its tense, yet working relationship with the government and its use of government funds?

I argue that the FOL's method of simultaneously working with and against the state forces many scholars to reconceptualize how they understand the relationship between social movements and progressive governments in contemporary Latin America. Given the recent shift to the left of many governments in South America, questions regarding this relationship have come to the forefront. However, many social movement scholars have approached these questions through the dichotomy of autonomy versus cooptation, while other Latin Americanists have imposed a rigid as well as moralizing conception of "clientelism" on the popular classes. In this conception, the political participation of the popular classes is understood mainly in terms of clientelistic exchanges with the government. Neither of these frameworks, however, adequately captures the practice of a movement like the FOL that has been able to earn government resources without pledging political loyalty and use them for their own ends.

The FOL's activism is more adequately captured by an approach that eschews dichotomous ways of thinking. One example of this is Brazilian scholar Marcelo Lopes de Souza's description of contemporary movements in the Global South as working "together *with* the state, *despite* the state, *against* the state" (2006). Souza seeks to show how social movements, especially in the Global South, are going

beyond criticism and protest and beginning to implement forms of “grassroots urban planning” (328). Citing the *piqueteros* as one of the prime examples, Souza is aware that much of this work happens with the state, but he is also aware that much of it happens despite and against the state. Souza’s formulation is useful because of the way that it blurs the hard distinctions between autonomy and cooptation or even between reform and revolution. Although Souza’s claim that social movements are beginning to act as “critical urban planning agents” might be premature, his account of how movements are beginning to engage with the state in complex ways shows us how the debate of reform versus revolution is becoming a historical one, more a feature of the old left than the new left. In this new paradigm, it is no longer sufficient to take state power in order to be revolutionary, and working with the state is not necessarily reformist. In the Latin America of the pink tide, where leftist or center-left governments have taken power, this orientation towards movement work has become much more relevant.

In this chapter I analyze the way the FOL is able to capture and distribute state resources while maintaining their political independence and militant identity. The state resources in question, known as “social programs” (*planes sociales*), are forms of neoliberal welfare or mandatory work programs for welfare recipients known as “workfare.” These programs, which are mostly distributed through informal clientelist networks that require recipients to demonstrate political support for politicians and political parties, have become one of the primary “solutions” to the problem of unemployment for a certain sector of the population. However, the

temporary nature of this solution has at best replaced the problem of unemployment with the problem of casualization. I analyze these social programs as neoliberal forms of governance that seek to fragment space and society by dividing and isolating working class resistance while facilitating clientelistic relationships. I argue that the FOL resists this fragmentation by earning and administering these programs without pledging loyalty to any politician or political party and thus without participating in clientelist networks. In this way the FOL provides an example of *autogestión* from below that undermines the neoliberal fragmentation of space as well as the inference that receiving social programs necessarily leads to cooptation and a loss of autonomy.

The Social Programs and the Neoliberal Fragmentation of Space

The social programs in Argentina draw their origin to the return of democracy in 1983. It was at this time that Raúl Alfonsín's government sought to restore the system of social protections that had come into crisis in the 1970s. However, given the devastating effects of the military dictatorship's economic policies, the socio-economic conditions were fundamentally different than they were before the dictatorship (1976-1983). As opposed to the post-World War II era, the post-dictatorship years were marked by deindustrialization and a strong pauperization of the middle and popular classes. The question, then, was how to recreate this system of protections based on salaried work when important sectors of the population were excluded from formal work (Prévôt Schapira 1996: 74). The government found the answer in the social programs, which, in addition to providing much needed material support to the impoverished population, were also supposed to promote democracy

and civic participation at the local level. These programs were not only implemented in Argentina but all over Latin America as part of a larger “struggle against poverty,” which was promoted by international agencies such as the World Bank (WB) and the Bank of Inter-American Development (BID).¹²¹

According to Marie-France Prévôt Schapira (1996), the rhetoric surrounding the first social programs was about revitalizing local forms of democracy and solidarity. Within the context of the return to democracy, the idea was to base these programs in local forms of organization and representation in order to initiate citizen participation. Despite the rhetoric of decentralization and local democracy, the first social program, known as the *Programa de Ayuda Alimentaria* (PAN), was characterized by top-down control. One person in each province of the country was put in charge of the plan, political brokers of the Radical political party (*Unión Cívica Radical*, or UCR) controlled distribution and during elections the programs were used as a political resource.¹²² Although the idea was to foment participation, the primary activity was the distribution of resources to poor families. Later iterations of the social programs in the early 1990s were not only directly inspired by the World Bank, but they would also serve to coopt the *basista* movement, an independent socialist and Peronist movement that had been working at the neighborhood level since the

¹²¹ Other examples include the famous “Family Bag” (Bolsa Família) program in Brazil and the PLANE (*Plan Nacional de Empleo de Emergencia*) in Bolivia.

¹²² The fact that the first social plans were implemented and used as political resources by the UCR is theoretically significant fact in light of how later analyses would treat clientelism as if it were an exclusively Peronist phenomenon. I address this subject in detail below.

late 1960s.¹²³ Rather than inspiring national solidarity, the programs encouraged a restricted form of solidarity that, according to Prévôt Schapira, “fragments space and atomizes politics” (86). “With the passing of the years” Prévôt Schapira argues, “when unemployment worsened and the national policy turned towards liberal solutions, these welfare policies appeared to many to be forms of keeping the poor in their own territory” (88).¹²⁴ Rather than the revitalization of citizenship, then, one sees the depoliticization of the citizenry and new forms of locally based social control.

The government would continue to implement the programs throughout the 1990s, but they saw a dramatic increase after the crisis of 2001. In less than a month after being appointed President in 2002, Eduardo Duhalde greatly expanded one of the major programs of this period, the “Family Right to Social Inclusion: Heads of Unemployed Households Plan,” which increased from covering about 100,000 people to covering over 2 million (Maneiro 237-8).¹²⁵ Although the implementation of social programs did not solve the problem of unemployment, they would continue to be used under Peronist presidents Nestor and Cristina Kirchner. Much has been

¹²³ The *basista* movement began in the late 1960s when currents of liberation theology combined with elements of the Peronist movement. For a description of this movement and its eventual cooptation into forms of local governance see Prévôt Schapira (1999).

¹²⁴ Original: “Pero al cabo de los años, cuando el desempleo se agravó y la política nacional se orientó hacia soluciones liberales, estas políticas de asistencia aparecieron ante muchos como formas de mantener a los pobres en su territorio.”

¹²⁵ The original name is “Derecho Familiar de Inclusión Social: Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados.” While it is important to notice the very dramatic increase here, it is also important to notice, as Maneiro points out, that this figure does not even come close to reaching the close to 14 million people living under the poverty line in 2002. This is on top of the fact that the 150 pesos provided by this plan also fell short of the 350 pesos that a regular family of four would need to cover their basic necessities (239).

written about how the intelligent use of these programs has allowed the Kirchners to divide, coopt and control the large and powerful *piquetero* movement of the early 2000s (Cerrutti & Grimson, 2004; Maneiro, 2012; Merklen, 2005; Pereyra et. al., 2008; Svampa 2005; Svampa & Pereyra, 2003). However, little has been written about these programs as neoliberal forms of governance.

Analyzing these social programs as neoliberal forms of governance would draw important connections between pre and post-crisis Argentina. A growing number of scholars are identifying workfare as a key element of the neoliberal state (Jessop, 1993; Peck, 2001; 2002; Peck and Theodore, 2010; Wacquant, 2010). These authors recognize that neoliberalism is not simply about dismantling the welfare state but also about incentivizing and enforcing work while promoting individual responsibility and stigmatizing “dependency.” They argue that the retraction of welfare across the world and its replacement with innumerable workfare programs is not only a change in how resources are distributed but part of a larger neoliberal process that undermines citizenship, replacing citizens with clients.

Denis Merklen (2005) provides a thorough description of this neoliberal transformation of the Argentine landscape. Merklen points out that the logic behind the social programs is not how to guarantee the rights of workers, as it was under Perón, but how to assist the poor (119). He claims that this is a way of creating “the poor” as a new social identity, redefining the primary social problem as “poverty,” and establishing “assistance” as the primary means by which to combat this problem (126). Importantly, this is a fundamentally different way of conceptualizing the

population in Latin America and especially in Argentina where the tradition of work and working class culture had been one of the strongest. Here, the people had previously been included as the *pueblo trabajador* or the ‘working people’ (135). In contrast, the contemporary beneficiaries of the social programs are not “the workers” but “the poor.” Through Merklen’s account we can see how the process of neoliberalization produced new identities, relationships and political dynamics.

The neoliberal workfare offensive further works to “modernize” the Argentine state and transform the relationship between the state and the popular classes.¹²⁶ The first moment in this process, according to Merklen, is the privatization of social services, which creates the need for the state to deal with those who are unable to access these services. Second, similar to what Brenner et. al. (2012) refer to as “roll-out” processes of neoliberalization, new social programs are targeted and customized to different categories of people within the popular classes and implemented through different subnational levels of government. As a result, the popular classes no longer engage with the state through their unions as workers but as “the poor” through local or neighborhood-based non-governmental institutions (140-2). Thus, neoliberal workfare, as Wendy Brown argues with respect to neoliberalism, “is not only

¹²⁶ It should be noted that Merklen understands this “modernization” – which he puts in quotation marks – in a critical way. For him, ‘modernization’ leads the popular classes to become individualized and atomized “urban hunters,” hunting or savaging for different social plans rather than planting crops and planning for the future like the “farmer.” Thus, the metaphor of modernization actually works ‘backwards’ here, going from the farmer to the hunter-gatherer. Merklen’s conception of the ‘urban hunter,’ then, functions more as a critique of modernization and the urban jungle it has produced than an enthusiastic endorsement of this process. Instead of using this concept myself, however, and engaging with the metaphor of progress or regression, I use Wendy Brown’s (2015) language of neoliberal rationality to discuss the underlying force propelling these changes.

destructive but brings new identities, conducts, relations and worlds into being” (36). In this case, the new world is characterized by “poor people” who seek out social programs rather than jobs, not in urban or industrial centers but in their own *barrios* and among local organizations and political brokers.

As neoliberal forms of governance, these programs are also accompanied by progressive language of inclusion. As I described above, part of the justification for the social programs was that decentralization of government programs would lead to new forms of civic participation, local democracy, and solidarity. In the late 1990s, recognizing the fact that neoliberal policies were leading to the destruction of previous forms of social integration, international agencies such as the World Bank (WB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) decided to begin to foment what they referred to as “social inclusion.” Yet, as Merklen points out, seeking to address issues of social exclusion without addressing class issues maintains the neoliberal separation between the ‘social’ and the ‘economic’ realms. As Merklen asserts, once this separation has been accepted, the issue of poverty becomes the euphemistic sounding issue of “social inclusion” (138). This is exactly the type of model that was implemented in Argentina, as the proliferation of policies and non-governmental organizations in the name of “social inclusion” demonstrates.¹²⁷ The

¹²⁷ For example, in 2002 the National Council of Administration, Execution and Control for the Family Right to *Social Inclusion* (Consejo Nacional de Administración, Ejecución y Control para el Derecho Familiar de Inclusión Social, or CONAEYC) was established in order to control and operate a social plan known as the “Family Right to *Social Inclusion*: Heads of Unemployed Households Plan” (*Derecho Familiar de Inclusión Social: Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados*) (Maneiro 241, my emphasis).

other side of this progressive rhetoric, however, is a normative discourse that denigrates the recipients of these programs as participants in clientelist systems. As I explain in detail below, this moral discourse that targets the popular classes is rooted in neoliberal notions of individual responsibility.

Before concluding this discussion of the social programs, I want to anticipate a counter-argument. Some might make the claim that the social programs are not neoliberal but actually a contemporary version of corporatist and clientelist practices that can be traced back to Perón's first and second presidencies (1946-1955). However, I am not arguing that these are the first assistance programs in Argentina, nor am I arguing that all assistance programs are inherently neoliberal. Rather, I am linking the contemporary social programs in Argentina to neoliberalism. While to some they might appear to be a renewed version of the old, corporatist Peronist assistance programs, they are actually an example of a contemporary, neoliberal Peronism. The alliance between Peronism and neoliberalism is an example of what Brenner et. al. (2010) refer to as the capacity of neoliberalization projects to exploit and transform inherited institutional landscapes. Therefore, despite any similarity to the old Peronist assistance programs, these links do not negate the neoliberal character of these programs.

Despite my classification of these programs as neoliberal forms of governance, I argue that the FOL's use of them presents a challenge to this neoliberal logic from within. It should be clear that the social programs and the neoliberal logic that underpins them are now an established feature of the political landscape. In fact,

the question of whether to fight for these programs is no longer a debate within the *piquetero* movement, as it was in the early 2000s. Those who refused to struggle for the programs either eventually reversed their positions or simply became obsolete (Pereya et. al., 2008). Due to this close relationship between social plans and forms of protest, the important question for most *piquetero* organizations is no longer ‘if’ but ‘how’ to use these programs. Among movement activists in the FOL there is an ongoing discussion about what it means to mobilize for social programs and how organizations can avoid falling into clientelist practices. The academic literature on this question, however, is less clear-cut. In fact, the growing literature and discussion of clientelism in Argentina appears to foreclose the possibility of using social programs without participating in clientelist networks. Before discussing the FOL’s use of these programs, then, I will briefly turn to recent literature that has examined the relationship between contentious collective action and clientelism.

Protest and Clientelism

In a recent article, Javier Auyero et. al. take up the question of patronage politics and contentious collective action (2009). As a scholar who has done in-depth analyses of both of these phenomena in the Argentine context, Auyero is in a prime position to reflect on their complex relationship (2000; 2003; 2007). The authors’ main argument is that contentious collective action and clientelism should not be seen as opposites but as phenomena that intersect and interact and which, “often establish recursive relationships” (1). The authors also go one step further and suggest that clientelism, either by accident or by design, “may lie at the root of collective action”

(2). The claim that these two phenomena are mutually imbricated is an important one. The authors show that in many cases the existence of clientelist relationships does not suppress contentious collective action; in fact, it can be the source for this action in several different ways. Their argument also helps to challenge the common logic that pits these dynamics against each other as opposites. Clientelism, the authors show, is not based on purely vertical relationships and contentious collective action is not rooted only in horizontal relations. The increasing frequency of both in Argentina is only surprising if we ignore the realm of mutual influence between them.

While Auyero et. al. explore the ways in which contentious political action and clientelism interact, they are conscious that they have not captured all of the different types of relations that these dynamics may have. Indeed, they end with a call for further research in this vein in order to further flesh out the sticky relationship between these two dynamics. While I aim to contribute to this discussion, I also hope to challenge some aspects of the way the problem has been presented. As mentioned above, the authors go so far as to argue that clientelism may be at the root of collective action. This extension of their claim, however, over-simplifies the relationship between these two dynamics. In fact, I would claim that the authors have adopted a framework and language that privileges clientelism as a pre-existing and enduring social relationship that structures the appearance of collective action. For example, the authors use the terms “routine and non-routine problem solving strategies” to refer to clientelism and collective action, respectively (2). Yet, any regular commuter in Buenos Aires knows that contentious collective action is not by

any means a rare event. On the contrary, there is some kind of march, strike or roadblock every day in the city.¹²⁸ To adopt the idea that clientelism is the “routine” rule and collective action is the “non-routine” exception to the rule, is to already establish clientelism as an *a priori* constant dynamic within which collective action occasionally occurs. From here, the argument that clientelism is “the root of collective action” is merely an extension of the underlying framework.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the concept of “clientelism” has become the primary framework for understanding different varieties of protest. This concept has recently seen a large resurgence within academic literature both from Argentine as well as foreign scholars (Calvo & Murillo, 2004; Frederic, 2004; Levitsky, 2003; Martuccelli & Svampa, 1997; Quirós, 2008; Torres, 2005). Indeed, it is Auyero’s early work (1997; 2000) that has been credited for reviving this concept and making clientelism a popular object of study and subject of debate. Yet, there are certain problems with the way in which clientelism has recently been revived as a concept. Gabriel Vommaro argues that although he does not think that Auyero would disagree that other sectors of the population engage in clientelism, an unintended outcome of the success and influence of Auyero’s work has been an automatic association between clientelism and the popular classes, as well as between clientelism and Peronism (2010: 148-152). The automatic association has extended beyond academic literature and informs much of the discussion in the popular media. In much of this

¹²⁸ Not only is this the case for the city of Buenos Aires, but in the particular case of the FOL, mobilization is very much a routine practice.

work we see the uncritical adoption of the term “poor people.” By this I mean extensive discussion of “the poor” without paying attention to how this social category was created through specific government programs and a shift in governmentality. Further, Vommaro notices a trajectory in Auyero’s work in which the clientelist network is one of many social networks of the popular sectors in Auyero’s early work but progressively becomes the only relevant network when it comes to discussing the means by which these sectors engage in politics.¹²⁹ Finally, due to the political and moral baggage of the term, Vommaro argues that these associations unwittingly reinforce a host of normative associations and stereotypes about how the popular sectors engage in politics (148-9). One might argue that, in the end, clientelism remains caught in the “metonymic prison” from which Auyero attempted to rescue it (2000: 20).

Returning our attention to neoliberalism, we can see the ways in which the moral baggage of clientelism that Vommaro signals is rooted in neoliberal ideas of responsabilization. Wendy Brown (2015) defines this term as “the moral burdening of the entity at the other end of the pipeline. Responsibilization tasks the worker, student, consumer or indigent person with discerning and undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving; it is in this regard a manifestation of human capitalization” (132-3). This is the same “moral

¹²⁹ One compilation, put together by social anthropologists, directly challenges this notion, arguing instead that to understand the popular classes in Argentina we must take a holist approach to their “relational cosmology.” Thus, the contributors discuss forms of culture, religiosity and political participation they have found in their ethnographic work on the popular classes (Míguez and Semán, 2006).

burdening” that one sees in Argentina with respect to those who receive social programs, but with the ironic exception that there is no “correct” strategy of self-investment for this population. The popular classes in Argentina must survive without access to the formal labor market, educational opportunities and in neighborhoods that lack basic urban infrastructure services, such as: housing, electricity and water. When they receive social programs they are criticized for being “dependent” on the state. Yet the neoliberal discourse that denigrates dependency conveniently forgets that everyone is dependent on the state.

In my discussion of the FOL below, I outline another way of understanding mobilization in this specific social context. Rather than understanding protest as a product or result of clientelist relationships, I will see it as existing in a complex relationship with clientelism and other social relationships. As I have attempted to demonstrate with my discussion of the social programs, it is more useful to see the larger context in terms of neoliberalism, rather than clientelism. A framework that starts with the neoliberalization process in Argentina is able to recognize the historical changes that have reshaped the country, one of which is the multiplication of workfare programs and the prominence of clientelist practices. Of course, it is the multiplication of neoliberal workfare programs that facilitates new forms of patronage politics.¹³⁰ However, besides enabling clientelist dynamics, these programs also open up the possibility of subverting their original purpose. Here, I will focus on the ways

¹³⁰ I am not arguing that clientelism is *only* possible under neoliberalism, but only that contemporary forms of clientelism in Argentina are made possible and occur under the current neoliberal regime.

in which the FOL subverts this neoliberal logic, but I am also attentive to the ways in which it struggles to resist some of the more pervasive aspects of this logic.

The Battle for *Autogestión*

The FOL is a nationally based *piquetero* movement made up of various sub-movements that can be traced back to the origins of the *piquetero* movement in the province of Buenos Aires in the late 1990s. These movements, which already knew each other from the frequent mega-marches and roadblocks of those tumultuous years, came together at a time when the country had begun to recuperate its economic and political stability. The new progressive government sought to quell resistance by dividing and coopting the *piquetero* movement. Some movements promised to end the roadblocks in exchange for social programs. The new Kirchner administration also offered the leaders of some movements positions in government. Faced with a fracturing movement and the loss of legitimacy in the public eye, the movements that formed the FOL came together in order to maintain their oppositional stance. Since 2006, the FOL has maintained its political independence from the government, continuing to march and demand resources while building its territorial constructions at the neighborhood level. Despite the shifting political context, the FOL has been able to take resources from the state and administer them according to its own principles and priorities, while maintaining its autonomy.

In the year I spent with the FOL I came to learn that the social programs, which initially appeared to be foreign to the movement's ethos, are actually central to the practice of the movement, specifically, the process of marching and earning them,

as well as using them to fuel the internal economy of the movement. The programs give the FOL the capacity to fund its neighborhood projects, which include the construction of cultural centers, self-managed cooperatives, popular high schools and other projects. An important element of this strategy is that it is a place-based struggle rooted in particular neighborhoods of the *Conurbano* and other areas where the FOL is located.¹³¹ The acquisition of social programs is part of what activists refer to as the “demand-oriented” (*reivindicativo*) side of the movement. For the activists, this side of the movement functions like a labor union. The purpose of this union is to organize workers in order to make public demands to the state. In fact, the FOL, along with several other *piquetero* movements, has established its own “union,” known the AGTCAP (*Asociación Gremial de Trabajadores de Cooperativas Autogestionadas y Precarizados*, Union Association of Cooperative, Self-Managed and Casualized Workers).¹³² The AGTCAP is the tool that the FOL and other organizations use to ‘unionize’ unemployed and casualized workers. Rather than striking over wages and working conditions, the AGTCAP mobilizes to demand social programs or food staples (*mercadería*).

¹³¹ While neighborhood-based aspect of the FOL’s practice is not my primary focus here, it is the central focus of another chapter I what the FOL calls “complex territorial work.” What is important about this form of organizing for my argument here is that even given the enormous difference in power between the state and this small movement, the FOL is able to use its local organization and knowledge of the territory to its advantage in their negotiations with the state.

¹³² The four other *piquetero* movements that make up the AGTCAP are: The Frente Popular Darío Santillán, Movement of Unemployed Workers Anibal Verón Nueva Fuerza, Movement of Teresa Rodriguez Democracia Directa, and the Agrupación Barrial Victor Choque.

Acquiring and administering these social programs means something different depending on the programs. The Program Argentina Works (*Programa Argentina Trabaja*, or PAT), for example, is a workfare program in which the recipients work four hours a day, four days a week for a modest subsidy. The recipients of this program can often be seen wearing their government issued clothing, cleaning the plazas or performing other tasks in the neighborhood.¹³³ This program has given the FOL the capacity to offer members the equivalent of part-time employment to work within the movement. Crucially, however, the FOL controls the conditions of their labor under the PAT. Thus, movement members perform tasks that are much more relevant to the movement, such as building cultural centers, doing administrative work and working in the popular kindergarten. Part of the reason why the FOL is able to control the conditions of its labor under the PAT is because it is a territorial organization. Being organized in the territory allows the FOL to assert that it knows the territory and its needs better than the government itself in its negotiations with the government. Although the funding from the PAT comes from the government, the FOL uses these resources in the ways it sees fit.

Other social programs, however, function differently. For example, the Program for Self-Managed Work (*Programa de Trabajo Autogestivo*, or PTA) is specifically designed to pay workers who are organized into self-managed

¹³³ The FOL earned several of these plans in a campaign called “cooperatives without brokers” (*cooperativas sin punteros*) that it organized along with several other movements in 2009. The government gave in when these movements organized an encampment on the *Avenida 9 de Julio* in Buenos Aires that lasted 3 days.

cooperatives. The *Barrios Bonaerense*, on the other hand, is simply a subsidy for the unemployed.¹³⁴ Other social programs, such as “Clean Sidewalks” (*Veredas Limpias*) and Water and Sanitation (*Aguas y Saneamientos*, or AySA), are workfare programs that have a fixed work task, for example, in case of *Veredas Limpias*, cleaning the sidewalks in the city of Buenos Aires and stripping posters from the wall. In the case of *Veredas Limpias* the FOL does not have control over the conditions of their labor. However, many of these work teams are entirely made up of members from the FOL, allowing them to conduct their own assemblies and plan their own marches and strikes to demand higher wages and better working conditions. Finally, many members do not have the benefit of earning a program. While these members are not expected to put in the same hours as someone receiving remuneration, they are encouraged to participate actively so that they can be considered when a program opens up.

As each social program is different and each was acquired in a different way, there is a vast range of the types of projects in which the FOL is engaged. In some cases, the FOL has a great deal of control over the conditions of its labor. In these cases, the members organize themselves into small cooperatives that collectively decide what needs to be done, how to do it, when to take breaks and so on. This type of labor is usually based in the various cultural centers that the FOL maintains in its neighborhoods. In other cases, members work in more traditional conditions that

¹³⁴ In fact, the movement signed me up for a *Barrios Bonaerense* and I was able to earn payment in return for my work with the construction crew.

include commuting to city and working under a boss. Yet, even when the FOL has been able to manage government funds autonomously, it is far from achieving its own ideal of *autogestión* in the neighborhoods. First, the political and contested nature of the social programs force the FOL to engage in almost permanent mobilization, making participation in the movement very demanding. Further, the programs pose the threat of cooptation by a seemingly progressive but nonetheless neoliberal administration.

Permanent Mobilization

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the FOL is in a state of nearly permanent mobilization. The frequent and confrontational marches occur at least once a week and there are often more, even if they do not require the presence of the entire movement. I argue that this form of direct action allows the FOL to resist the neoliberal fragmentation of space and society in several ways. First, when the FOL mobilizes it brings its members from different neighborhoods together to make a collective demand to the state. This practice not only unifies the demands of its disparate neighborhoods but allows the FOL to construct and perform its combative oppositional identity. Secondly, by bringing various territorial movements together under the banner of the AGTCAP, the FOL further challenges the territorial atomization of politics. Third, by targeting municipal, provincial and national government agencies through nationally coordinated campaigns,¹³⁵ the FOL asserts

¹³⁵ In fact, many of the marches of the AGTCAP, including some that I attended are national campaigns with protests taking place not only in Buenos Aires, but also in La Plata, Mar del Plata, Rosario, Jujuy de San Salvador and other cities.

the responsibility of the state in responding to the concerns of labor as well as the national character of the labor struggle. And fourth, by applying pressure through confrontational forms of direct action such as encampments and roadblocks, the FOL and the AGTCAP use spatial tactics to bring public attention to their cause. Thus, by bringing their struggle into the street and making it public, the FOL de-localizes, re-nationalizes and, most importantly, re-politicizes the labor movement.

The phrase I use for the title of this paper, “*las cosas se ganan en la calle,*” (things are won in the street) is the way in which many members express their acceptance and approval of this form of struggle when they speak. I heard this phrase in many of my conversations and interviews with movement members as well as at movement meetings. *Las cosas* – things – are the materials that the movement obtains through mobilization. These can be social programs, merchandise or it can be an improvement of social programs that the movement has already earned, such as higher wages under the PAT. To say that these things are “won in the street” is a militant way of affirming that the material gain has not been handed down by a generous government but earned through a hard-fought, street-based form of struggle. The phrase and its popular usage demonstrates the way in which movement members have re-signified the social programs by associating them with the hard work of street-based struggle rather than pledging political loyalty. While those who participate in clientelist networks engage in mobilization in exchange for social programs and merchandise, this kind of mobilization is far from what the FOL would recognize as “struggle.” Rather than mobilizing to support politicians, the FOL

mobilizes against the state, chanting and singing songs that denounce the government and its corrupt clientelist network, such as the one in the epigraph to this chapter.

They also create slogans that directly contradict government claims. For example, in response to President Cristina Kirchner's claim that 2003-2013 represented the "Victorious Decade" (*Decada Ganada*), the FOL covered the entrance of the Ministry of Work with a banner that read "The Casualized Decade" (*La Decada Precarizada*).¹³⁶ Thus, the fact that the programs or merchandise come from the state does not by any means take away the militancy with which the FOL demands them. Indeed, as the phrase *las cosas se ganan en la calle* suggests, many are proud of the fact that they have ripped these resources away from the state.

In the FOL's struggle against the state, we can also observe a deeper struggle against the neoliberal assault on labor organization. First, the FOL's identity as "unemployed workers," an identity that is rooted in the history of the *piquetero* movement, is in direct opposition to identifying as "poor people."¹³⁷ Second, the formation of the AGTCAP as a "union" of casualized workers that marches in the streets contradicts of the trend in which "the poor" interact with the state only through brokers and other non-governmental organizations. Finally, as noted above, the FOL

¹³⁶ See figure 4.2 below.

¹³⁷ As I discovered in my fieldwork, the term "unemployed workers" is not understood as an oxymoron as an outside observer might think. Rather, the FOL takes the identity and dignity associated with being a "worker" very seriously. Of course, the dignity attached to the label of "worker" is especially strong in Argentina where the Peronist tradition of the working people (*pueblo trabajador*) and the strong labor movements of the twentieth century, before and after Perón, have had an enormous impact on the culture. Thus, the FOL, does not attempt to re-signify or reclaim terms like 'marginalized' or 'lumpenproletariat'. In fact, as I saw in my time with the movement, the term "lumpen," for example, was always used in a pejorative way.

challenges the neoliberal fragmentation of space by bringing various territorial movements together under the AGTCAP and the *Frente de Lucha*¹³⁸ and taking their struggle to “the street.” Rather than abandoning this form of struggle to dedicate itself entirely to its neighborhood projects, the FOL uses its territorial organization as a basis from which to engage in mobilizations. In fact, despite their novel and innovative projects at the neighborhood level, I noticed that in many ways the FOL privileges “the street” as the central locus of struggle. This allows the FOL to resist the fragmentation of space by plugging into the labor movement’s long tradition of marching in the streets and occupying public spaces.

Although the FOL has succeeded in earning government resources through precisely this strategy, it is not without its challenges. Specifically, the FOL’s need and commitment to mobilization makes participation in the movement very demanding. While the FOL depends on direct action for access to government resources, this form of mobilization also appears to be inextricably connected to the organization’s identity as a *piquetero* movement. It is not a coincidence, for example, that the word *lucha* or “struggle” is inscribed in the name of the FOL itself. As I came to learn, *lucha* or “struggle” in the language of the movement almost never referred to the struggle in general – the struggle to change society, to change people or to build ‘bodies of popular power in the neighborhoods’ – but rather it had a much

¹³⁸ The *Frente de Lucha* is a political project to unite and engage with different movements that happen to exist next to each other in the territory. As opposed to bringing together the entire organizations, which, like the FOL, are usually dispersed throughout large territories, the idea is to unite smaller units of one organization with another.

more specific meaning that referred to the struggle in the street.¹³⁹ While marches rather than *piquetes* are the primary form of mobilization today, it is clear that this concept of struggle was forged in the heat of the *piquetero* movement. Of course, it was the very militant process of forming roadblocks (*piquetes*) from which the *piqueteros* got their name and their identity. This history, then, goes a long way in explaining the importance and centrality of a specifically street-based form struggle with which the FOL still identifies.

While this militant form of consciousness is at the crux of the FOL's identity and practice, it is not necessarily an identity that all members share. Speaking with Julia, for example, I learned about how she was frustrated at the attitude that many of her *compañeros* had. As Julia explained:

There are *compañeros* who put in a lot of effort for a while. They say, ok, I'll go to the marches, I'll go and I'll do this, this, and this, until they get a job. Once they get a job they forget about where they come from. Because they say, "No I'm here because of the government." No you're wrong. You're not here because of the government but because of [the movement]. They participate but they do the minimum. That is, they go to the assemblies but they do the minimum amount of work possible. I don't agree with that. I, for example – now that they're organizing the 20th anniversary of the *Galpón* [cultural center] – can't participate very much because I'm working on the weekends. But I will participate by, I don't know, making food and bringing it. It's a way of participating, and I think I collaborate a lot around here. But I need to go out and look for other things because the money is not enough for me.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ The name of the FOL's internal magazine "Struggle and Create" (*Luchar y Crear*) was another place where I saw this understanding of struggle as something that happens in the streets while the task in the neighborhood is to "create."

¹⁴⁰ Original: "Hay cumpas que hacen mucho esfuerzo durante un tiempo – de decir bueno yo voy a las marchas, voy hago esto y esto, hasta que logran tener el puesto de trabajo. Una vez que tienen el puesto de trabajo se olvidan de donde vinieron. Porque dicen "Ah no porque yo estoy por el gobierno, no estas equivocado. Vos no estas por el gobierno si no [por el movimiento.] Participan pero hacen lo mínimo. Ósea van a las asambleas, hacen lo mínimo posible. Que yo no lo veo. Yo por ahí [por ejemplo] cómo se organiza la fiesta del galpón, los 20 años. Yo por ahí no puedo participar porque yo ahora los fin de semanas laburo. Pero si participo en hacer algo, que se yo, comida y eso, y traerla. Pero... que es una forma de

In Julia's description of some of her *compañeros* we can see some of the limitations of the movement in terms of subjectivity. Those who participate only to get a "job," as Julia says, allow us to see an aspect of the movement that appears to be clientelist. One goes to the marches and attends the meetings in order to get a social program but without getting politicized or taking on the identity of a worker or a militant. While the cases that Julia refers to exist, I found that those in this situation often experience the obligations and criteria of the FOL as more demanding than what other *piquetero* movements or political brokers ask of them. For this reason, many of these members end up either leaving of their own accord or, in extreme situations, even being asked to leave by the movement. Thus, while some community members attempt to treat the FOL as if it were simply another neighborhood broker or an employment agency, the FOL's collective criteria and heavy demands on members function as a way of protecting itself against these type of clientelist practices. As we can see in Julia's account, she presents the behavior of these members as a kind of betrayal or "forgetting about where they come from."

Julia, on the other hand, has clearly adopted the militant identity of the FOL. She is a good example of a member who joined out of material necessity but has also been politicized to a certain degree by her participation in the movement. For her, the resources of the movement come from its collective and militant action rather than the generosity of the government. She notes that she is unable to participate as much

participar y yo creo que colaboro muchísimo acá. Pero porque tengo que salir a buscar otra cosa porque no me alcanza el dinero" (Interview with "Julia" 9/24/2013).

as she would like because the money is not enough for her and her work schedule does not allow it. However, she finds ways around this as she explains in the example of the anniversary celebration. On a more everyday level, I saw the way Julia came to the delegate assembly every week since she was unable to come to the neighborhood assembly. Even as Julia demonstrates the militant identity of the FOL, it is important to recognize that the lack of sufficient compensation does not allow her to commit fully and abandon her other work commitments. On top of subjective limitations, then, the FOL also deals with material limitations to full participation.

The difference between members who do the minimum and those who have adopted the identity of the movement was visible in other ways. For example, at one of the first marches I had attended, which has held to demand a raise for workers of the *Veredas Limpias* program, there were several members who wanted to go home when they realized that the protest was going to take more time than expected. Some of these members went to Héctor, one of the activists, and asked him if they could go home. Héctor's response was to ask the *compañeros* to stop asking him what to do since he did not have the authority to tell anyone what to do. Instead, he called an assembly, which was held in the middle of the street. During the assembly, several members again said they wanted to go home; they claimed they needed to take care of their kids and that they needed to work the next day. Héctor told them that if everyone who had to work the next day were to go home right now then "all of this goes to shit."¹⁴¹ This argument effectively ended the discussion. One person,

¹⁴¹ Fieldnotes.

however, said that they should be able to leave since it was their birthday. The rest of the group accepted this logic, and the man left with his son. This episode is illustrative of several important points that deserve to be elaborated.

The first important point is that several of those who wanted to go home represent a particular type of member that usually does not last very long as a member of the FOL without leaving or adapting to the movement's ethos. In fact, I knew these specific members from the march from working with them in the neighborhood. Not only did these members attempt to avoid the marches, but they barely worked in their positions as groundskeepers at the cultural center. Other members would complain that they showed up late, took many breaks and usually left early. Their level of commitment and responsibility could not be compared to the *compañeras* of the Popular Kindergarten, for example. Many of these members ended up leaving the movement for these reasons.¹⁴² I remember bumping into a couple of these members sometime after they had left the movement. They said they had found similar positions with the municipality that did not involve any marches. They told me specifically that there was too much marching in the FOL and that they were happy to have left. These former members, then, are the perfect example of those who never incorporated the militant identity of the FOL. They never accepted

¹⁴² Others have been asked to leave the movement. During my fieldwork there were some members who had been asked to leave who had been members for over ten years. While asking or even forcing members to leave might seem too harsh or extreme, many in the movement argue that it can often be done earlier.

that “things are won in the street” (*las cosas se ganan en la calle*), and their departure was ultimately beneficial to both parties.

Returning to the assembly, we can draw out other important lessons. It should be noted, for example, that while the desire to leave was widespread, Héctor had succeeded in getting most members to stay by using the assembly format. My point is not, however, that the decision was made “horizontally” or even democratically. Rather than glorifying this decision-making process, the crucial point to stress here is the way that the assembly gave Héctor the opportunity to frame the discussion in a way that prioritized the protest, in keeping with the FOL’s larger mission.¹⁴³ Those who wanted to argue in favor of leaving, however reasonable their logic, would have to contend with what Héctor had set up as the ultimate priority: not allowing the protest to fail. Although Héctor had no need to say it explicitly, having a strong presence in the street is a fundamental aspect of the FOL’s identity and mission. By abandoning the march, they would not only be sabotaging the hard work of many of their *compañeros*, but they would be turning their back on the purpose of the organization.

The intense level of commitment, however, goes beyond frequent marches. In fact, participating in mobilizations is only one out of four “criteria” that the FOL has

¹⁴³ While this example is not the model of democratic decision-making, it is worth noting that Héctor seeks to communicate to his *compañeros* that the assembly format is the only legitimate way in which group decisions can be made. Although he takes a principal role in organizing and facilitating the assembly, he clearly sees this as fundamentally different from individually and unilaterally responding to the requests of his *compañeros* as if he were an authority figure.

established for members of “good standing.” The other three criteria are: participating in the neighborhood assembly, paying dues and having another task within the movement.¹⁴⁴ Those members who are completing at least three out of the four criteria are considered to be in good standing and they are eligible for a subsidy or a work position. Due to scarcity of programs, however, new members often have to wait for months before they are able to receive a work position. When a program opens up, the movement decides who to give it to by evaluating a member’s overall participation based on these criteria. However, as Julia’s testimony above demonstrates, even those who work within the movement and demonstrate a high level of commitment need to supplement their income by other means.

As the process of administering the programs and managing the internal economy of the movement is an intense one, the neighborhood and other assemblies are crucial tools to make these decisions while educating other members about the process. This means that members must attend several meetings and often have the task of informing members at one meeting about what happened at another. It is often the case that members have to be reminded about the criteria of the movement at a meeting or told that they must wait longer to get a program. There are other moments when members must select a member of good standing to replace another *compañero* who is leaving a particular program or work site. Movement members are

¹⁴⁴ In the movement these are known as: *asamblea*, *movilización*, *aporte*, and *tarea*. The *tarea*, or “task,” can be almost anything, for example: participation in the gender committee, becoming a neighborhood delegate, participation in the meeting of coordinators, cleaning the cultural center, acting as the steward (*casero*) of a cultural center, or volunteering in some other capacity.

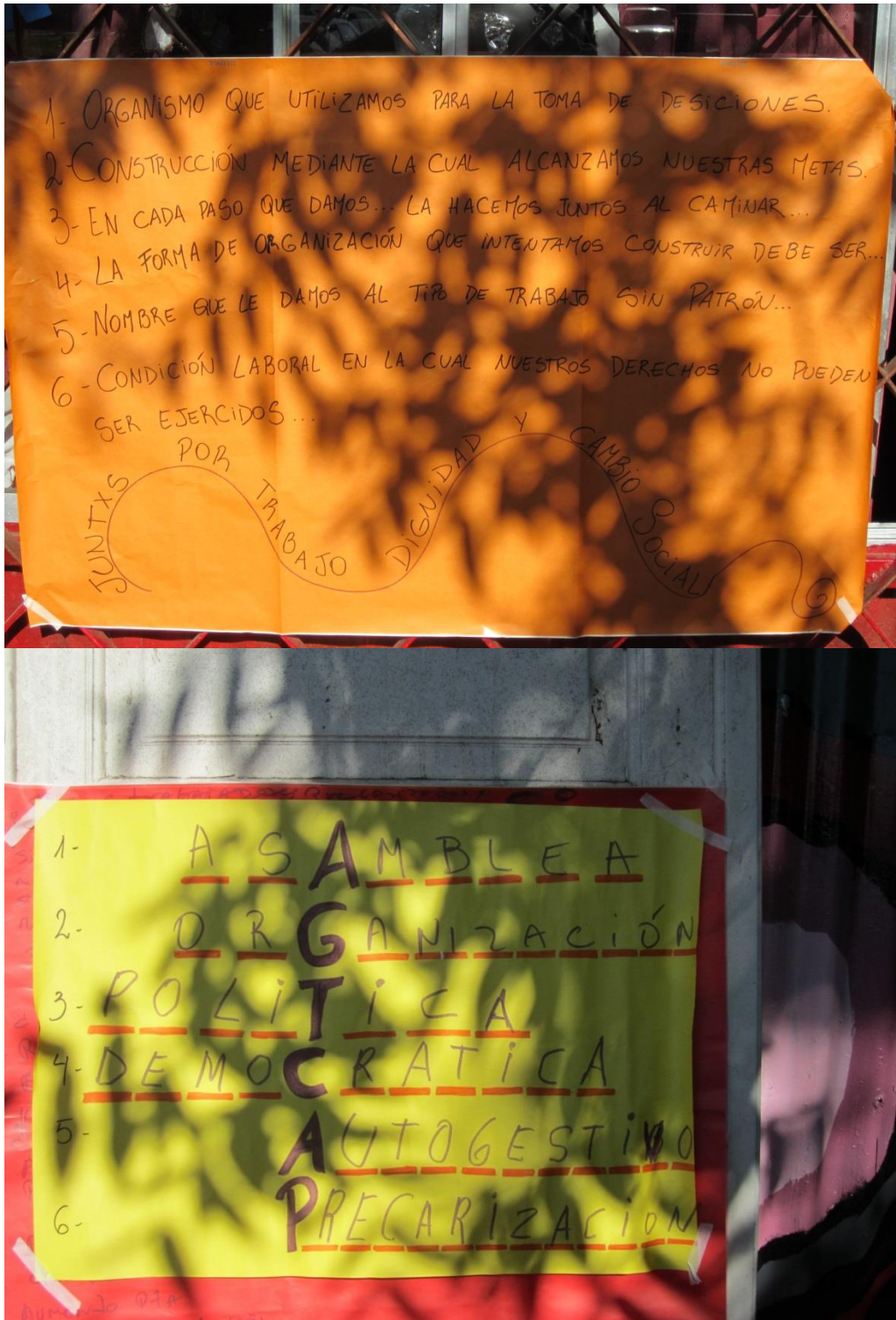
constantly balancing fairness while watching out for the economic survival of the movement. For example, while the movement has successfully demanded that the state buy many of the products that it produces in the self-managed cooperatives, there is often a long delay in the payment.¹⁴⁵ It is for this reason that the movement instituted the logistical accumulation fund (*fondo de acumulación logística*, or FAL), in order to save money from the social programs to pay those members who work in the cooperatives. This can mean delays or reduced payments for those with *Barrio Bonaerenses*, for example. The often-complicated maneuvers involving the FAL that members make during the economy meeting then need to be explained to the delegates in the movement meeting and then explained again at the neighborhood meetings. The other “criteria” of the movement, especially the various assemblies, are far from mere formalities. Rather, they are absolutely crucial in managing this system as well as functioning as educational spaces where members learn how the movement works and how to run assemblies.

This strict criterion differentiates the FOL from many other *piquetero* movements. There is a range of other *piquetero* movements, each with their own logic. Some are caught within the dynamic of mobilizing and distributing social programs to their members without developing very much organization in the neighborhood. These movements are often not building cultural centers, setting up self-managed cooperatives, establishing gender committees, popular high schools or kindergartens or setting up political training schools. These activities not only require

¹⁴⁵ In general, the state is supposed to take three months to pay but it can be much longer.

more organization overall but often require more paperwork and closer engagement with the state. Activists in the FOL would often describe these other movements as having a simpler “*piquetero*” logic. Since these movements had not evolved beyond the simple logic of mobilizing and distributing programs, many in the FOL describe them as “still in 2001,” a reference to the first years of the *piquetero* movement. Other *piquetero* movements, such as *Barrios de Pie*, operate by directly seeking out political brokers who are already in the neighborhood in order to act as organizers in the movement (Fornillo, 2008; Vommaro & Quirós, 2011). The activists of the FOL understand this as a way of participating and colluding with clientelist networks. The FOL’s position with respect to these other movements shows us how the FOL understands its principles as a way of protecting itself against clientelist practices and establishing a more participatory dynamic.

Figure 4.1: A word-puzzle from an educational meeting to explain the purpose and goals of the AGTCAP to movement members.



Translation: “1. Q: Organism we use to make decisions. A: Assembly. 2. Construction we use to achieve our ends. A: Organization. 3. Q: In every step we take we make... as we walk the path... A: Politics. 4. Q: The form of organization that we try to construct should be... A. Democratic. 5. Q: The name we give to work without a boss. A: Autogestivo (Self-managed). 6. Q: A labor condition in which our rights cannot be exercised. A: Casualization.” Photos taken by author 5/17/13.

Figure 4.2: A march of the AGTCAP that ended with an encampment in front of the Ministry of Work, Employment and Social Security.



The banner reads “*La Decada Precarizada*” (The Casualized Decade). Photo taken by author 5/30/2013.

The Threat of Cooptation

While the FOL has been able to administer these state resources independently and even take control of some of their working conditions, the social programs themselves still pose many risks. As I explain below, the cooperatives established by the FOL along with many others are actually promoted by the state in

progressive language as forms of “*autogestión*” and “social economy” (Hopp, 2013). This is yet another instance of neoliberal appropriation of progressive sounding concepts. In the same way that the state promotes “social inclusion” without addressing its economic aspect, it appropriates “*autogestión*,” and “social economy” as terms that are void of any concept of political struggle. In this rendering, *autogestión* becomes neoliberal. That is, rather than representing a participatory approach to organization that is based in struggle and hostile towards the state, it becomes a form economic responsabilization and entrepreneurialism. If coopting language is the first step towards coopting movements, then the state is preparing the ground to neutralize not only the cooperatives of the *piquetero* movement but all movements that see *autogestión* as a valid method of struggle, including the worker-recuperated enterprises, the popular high schools and other movements. As the FOL uses state funds to establish its own worker cooperatives in the neighborhood, then, they risk incorporating neoliberal imperatives that are antithetical to their project. Thus, the social programs, and the neoliberal rationality that underpins them, produce a complex terrain that threatens to blur the lines between *autogestión* and neoliberalism.

I first became aware of the state’s larger programs to promote a social economy when I heard some members of the movement talk about a new class they were attending. The class was for a diploma in “social economy” and it was provided

by the Ministry of Social Development.¹⁴⁶ Since the state provided extra funding to the cooperatives that sent members to the class, the movement took advantage of this to attend and then feed the money back into the movement. Although I was not allowed to go to the class,¹⁴⁷ I learned from other members that the purpose was to teach the students how to run cooperatives, everything from how to do legal paperwork to how to run a meeting. The members told me that the class was so progressive that it even talked about “horizontalism” and “direct democracy.” Yet, as I discussed these classes with some of the activists it became clear that the larger purpose was to train the students to be able to eventually run their self-managed cooperatives alone and without government support. The “social economy” that these classes envision is actually a step beyond neoliberal workfare. It is a utopian vision in which start-up, micro-enterprises would eventually compete on the market with large corporations and regular businesses, even after losing the funding attached to the social programs.

The activists of the FOL are aware of the danger of this official version of *autogestión*. When I asked Raúl to tell me about the debate surrounding *autogestión* within the movement he told me the following:

Yes, *autogestión*, [we approach it as] part of the historical tradition of cooperativism. It is an old concept and we have appropriated it. And also as part of a more libertarian tradition, those of us who are guevarists, council communists, anarchists take it as a paradigm in which we are in agreement that we have to construct solutions to our own problems and self-manage our own affairs. The issue, is that we have always distinguished between self-financing and self-management. That was

¹⁴⁶ The website for the class can be found here along with several documents used in the class (<http://www.desarrollosocial.gob.ar/diplomaturaoperadorsocioeducativo/468>).

¹⁴⁷ This class was only for members of cooperatives that were registered with the state. Since I was not a registered member of any of these cooperatives I could not attend the class.

also a debate in the movement in terms of the movement's relationship to the state. We had comrades who were very afraid of the state and so they said 'nothing from the state' and we [the movement] had to do everything. But we have seen how that forces us into a dynamic in which we have to finance ourselves.¹⁴⁸

It is notable that after providing a quick explanation of how the FOL interprets the concept of *autogestión*, Raúl signals the distinction that the movement had to make between self-management and self-financing. The distinction between these two terms allows the FOL to embrace the concept of *autogestión*, that is, taking control of the conditions of one's labor and implementing a more participatory and democratic form of organization, versus a self-financed form of *autogestión*, which would involve doing all this but on their own budget. A self-financed *autogestión* might value a participatory approach to organization or production but discard the political or combative element of *autogestión* that fights the state for higher wages. For the FOL this is not enough; *autogestión* must involve making demands of the state. The state's resources, as I often heard in the movement, belong to the people (*el pueblo*). If one is not appropriating these resources from the state and putting them at the service of the people then *autogestión* can become a de-politicized, even moralistic concept. As Raúl notes, there were members who had this conception early on and did not want to engage the state in any way. Interestingly, having this internal debate

¹⁴⁸ Original: "Si la autogestion, como una tradición histórica del cooperativismo. Es [un concepto] viejo y nosotros lo [apropiamos]. Y también como cierta tradición más libertaria, de autogestión, [lo tomamos] lo que somos [del] guevarismo, consejismo, anarquismo, así como paradigma estamos de acuerdo en que la gente tenemos que construir soluciones a nuestras propios problemas y autogestionar las cosas. El asunto, es que siempre hemos distinguido entre lo que es autofinanciamiento y autogestión. Que esa fue una discusión también en el movimiento en la [discusión del] relación [del movimiento] con el estado. Teníamos compañeros que temían mucho al estado, entonces decían que el estado nada y nosotros hacíamos las cosas. Pero se ha visto que a poco andar el autofinanciamiento" (Interview with "Raúl" 7/18/2013).

allowed the movement to consolidate its position with respect to *autogestión* even before the state began formulating its plan for the new “social economy.” Since this position holds the state responsible for financing projects of *autogestión* and even guaranteeing certain work conditions, it is unlikely that progressive-sounding concepts such as ‘social economy’ and ‘*autogestión*’ will change the way the FOL defines these terms. However, it does show us that the FOL’s battle for *autogestión* is at the same time a battle over *autogestión*.

The FOL’s position with regard to *autogestión* also differs from the autonomist position that understands the self-managed cooperatives as pre-figurative forms of resistance. This is in contrast to autonomist authors who have greatly exaggerated the role of new “solidarity economies” emerging within *piquetero* movements. For example, Paul Chatterton writes, “The strength of the MTDs has been in their commitment to disengagement with the formal economy and the creation of a local, independent *economía solidaria* (the solidarity economy) oriented to meeting community needs while reducing dependency on the state and exposure to the market” (555). However, to suggest that the microenterprises of the *piqueteros* add up to an entire “solidarity economy” is a great exaggeration. In my time with the FOL, I saw that some of its self-managed cooperatives were up and running but others were barely functional and still others were only able to function because of the complex financial maneuvers involving the FAL.¹⁴⁹ Further, I

¹⁴⁹ Further, Chatterton is describing this “solidarity economy” in 2004 and 2005, nine years earlier than when I conducted my own fieldwork.

observed that the cooperatives of the FOL were able to survive only because they sold the vast majority of their products back to the state. In light of this reality, the claim that the *piqueteros* are developing an entire “solidarity economy” that reduces their dependency on the state and exposure to the market is simply untrue.

The argument that the self-managed cooperatives of the *piqueteros* have reduced dependency on the state is not only untrue but also furthers the neoliberal stigmatization of dependency. As I outlined above, neoliberal conceptions of responsabilization have led to a critique of dependency. While this critique comes from the right, it appears to be shared by some on the left. In fact, the autonomist conception of *autogestión*, which we might call “self-financed *autogestión*,” not only shares this critique of dependency but appears to be informed by the neoliberal agenda of responsabilization and entrepreneurialism. Unlike the autonomists, however, the FOL has no illusions about any kind of solidarity economy emerging in the neighborhood. In fact, the distant and utopian character of this goal leads the FOL to entertain a variety of temporary solutions, including getting its members work positions within the formal job market, *en blanco*, as the local terminology has it. And yet, it must maintain this position even while it continues to fight for social programs and set up cooperatives. The difficulty of this position was perhaps best summed up when I heard a member jokingly say, “they haven’t coopted us, but they’ve got us by the balls.”

Returning once again to the location of politics, we can say that the FOL’s insistence on the role of state in financing its projects is another a way of refusing

both the neoliberal fragmentation of space and politics and the responsabilization of individuals or individual cooperatives. The neoliberal impulse, in this case, seeks to create a social economy in the *barrios*. But by insisting on the role of the state and taking their struggle to the street, the FOL forces this issue onto a national and public agenda. Further, the FOL frames the issue directly as a matter of casualization, which is a way of exposing and discrediting the state's conception of the "social economy." Of course, as long as there is casualization, the project of "*autogestión*" or establishing a "social economy" remains incomplete. Once again, the practice of direct action summed up by the phrase "*las cosas se ganan en la calle*" allows the FOL to politicize a struggle that is at risk of getting reduced to the *barrio* or to individual enterprises. This could be framed as a "political resistance of scale" in opposition to what Jamie Peck has termed a "political economy of scale" (2002). In the same way that Peck argues that neoliberal workfare is multiscalar, the FOL engages in a multiscalar resistance as it targets municipal, provincial and national levels of government while continuing to build its own projects in the neighborhoods. In fact, it is perhaps this insistence on struggling on multiple fronts that gives the FOL a fighting chance in its asymmetrical battle with, despite and against the state.

Conclusion

The FOL's oppositional stance and use of state resources that I have highlighted here has not been well understood or appreciated by a range of commentators. On the one hand, there is a group of scholars who have begun to fetishize "autonomy" as the only way to engage in resistance that will not be coopted

(Dinerstein, 2015; Monteagudo, 2010; Sitrin, 2012; Zibechi, 2007). Suspicious of progressive governments, the social programs and the threat of cooptation, these analysts have turned to movements that categorically reject the state as the only alternative. On the other hand, there is a literature that analyzes the rise of leftist governments in Latin America, posing the question of “confrontation or cooptation” (Prevost et. al., 2012). However, this can become a limiting binary, especially if the use of state resources is always understood as a form of “clientelism.” This dichotomy between statist and anti-statist forms of social change has obscured those movements that work with the state but also despite and against the state, as Souza puts it (2006). As I argue above, the concept of clientelism and its association with the popular classes can distort the way that scholars study and understand different forms of contentious politics. Further, the call for autonomy can converge with the moral discourse against clientelism that associates the social programs with a negative conception of “dependency.” Ironically, then, the normative logic and discourse of neoliberalism finds its way both onto the left and the right ends of the political spectrum.

While the election of Mauricio Macri as president in 2015 poses new challenges for the FOL, it does not fundamentally alter the landscape in which the FOL operates. Macri cannot eliminate the social programs implemented during the Kirchner years even if it fits his political agenda. On the contrary, these programs are aligned with Macri’s neoliberal political orientation, despite the heavy rhetoric against “dependency.” Further, while material conditions for the working and

popular classes have become more difficult, the move to the right provides the FOL the opportunity to establish more alliances and wider coalitions with other movements who oppose the administration. It is worth mentioning as well, that the FOL's stance against the Kirchners is also a stance against Macri, as evidenced by the optional line to the song in the epigraph to this chapter, which comes right after the line about the Kirchners: "And against Macri!" (*Y contra Macri!*).

In their struggle for *autogestión*, the FOL shows that receiving social programs does not necessarily lead to cooptation or traditional clientelist practices. Further, the FOL manages these funds autonomously, but it is not autonomous in the strict sense of being self-sufficient. In contrast to this conception, the FOL works with the state: negotiating with government agencies, taking advantage of their programs and using their resources. However, this work would be impossible if it was not based in the militant direct action that I have highlighted here. This militant action, which brings the movement out of the neighborhood and into public space, manages to politicize the social programs, making them the target of a reconfigured labor movement. Even while they take advantage of workfare programs, however, the FOL struggles to oppose the more pernicious aspects of the neoliberal logic that underpins them. This struggle requires a high level of commitment, consciousness, and sacrifice among all the members. Further, their close proximity to the state presents a constant danger of both material and ideological forms of cooptation. Despite this, the FOL maintains its fundamental project of mobilizing opposition to the larger neoliberal offensive against the popular classes. It is this principled and

committed, albeit difficult to maintain, opposition that is summed up by the phrase:

las cosas se ganan en la calle.

Chapter Five

Complex Territorial Work: The Neighborhood Activism of a *Piquetero*

Movement

On a particular Saturday afternoon during my ethnographic fieldwork at one of the cultural centers of the FOL, I noticed that I was surrounded by an overwhelming amount of activity. A group known as the Gender Commission was hosting on a neighborhood bingo as a fundraiser for their trip to a national meeting in another part of the country. There were well over 100 people both inside and outside of the Cultural Center. At the same time, a group known as the Water Workshop was in the stream directly adjacent to the center, cleaning and collecting data on the level of pollution. Not to be outdone, a group known as the Popular High School held an assembly behind the cultural center, making plans for the rest of the school year. These three cultural projects are the neighborhood extensions of the FOL, a *piquetero* movement that began when unemployed workers set up *piquetes* or roadblocks on major highways in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the years of the crisis in Argentina. While the *piqueteros* are known for their roadblocks, which involves barricades of burning tires and face masks, their neighborhood activism has been much less visible to the public.

When I came to Argentina in 2012 I was looking for what the global left was calling horizontalism and autonomy. For many theorists, Argentine social movements were evidence that the “multitude” was indeed a global force or that activists were committed to “changing the world without taking power.” These

analyses were often focused on the moment of the crisis and inspired by the spontaneous popular uprising that ousted President Fernando de la Rúa in December of 2001. Yet, what I found years after the crisis when I began my fieldwork, was that these theories were no longer, if ever, relevant in the Argentine context. Instead, movements had adapted to a new context, what we might call the crisis after the crisis. This is the moment when political and economic stability returned and forms of militant direct action began to lose their legitimacy. It was at this point that mass-based movements like the *piqueteros* began to fragment as they responded differently to the changing circumstances. What I found in the field is that movements spoke not of an abstract multitude that would come together spontaneously, but what they called “complex territorial work” (*trabajo territorial complejo*) that called for a long-term, place-based form of organizing in the neighborhood. Further, rather than using glorified concepts such as “horizontalism” and “autonomy,” they preferred the language of *autogestión* to describe the use and delegation of power.

In a well-known lecture given after the large protests of the Arab Spring, Judith Butler claims that “when crowds move outside the square, to the side street or the back alley, to the neighborhoods where streets are not yet paved, then something more happens” (2011: 1). Although it is almost naturally intuitive that “something more” does happen when these crowds return to the neighborhoods, it is difficult to imagine what exactly this looks like. I argue that something more does happen and that the complex territorial work of the FOL is one concrete version of what this looks like in the neighborhoods where the streets are not yet paved. This chapter will

analyze how the FOL transforms and produces space in neighborhoods. One of the clearest examples is the development and construction of cultural centers in particular neighborhoods. It will mean looking at the myriad of practices that these spaces allow and facilitate, the type of meanings they create, the relationships they foster, and the potentialities they hold. These centers are not only meant to be spaces of the movement, in a top-down and homogenizing fashion, but spaces of and for the neighborhood. Thus, as they develop they tend to take on the particular characteristics of those places, a process that may even find itself in tension with the objectives or capacity of the movement. The particularities and specific needs of each place or neighborhood also lead to the development of more place-based approaches on the part of the movement. Analyzing complex territorial work means being attentive to the dialectical, rather than unidirectional, process involved in this strategy.

It is not a coincidence that place or territory is a fundamental part the FOL's strategy. The FOL is located in the popular neighborhoods that have been transformed by what Denis Merklen calls "territorial inscription."¹⁵⁰ This is an economic, political and spatial product of neoliberalism that seeks to turn workers into poor people and citizens into clients. As people lose their jobs they begin to develop ties at the neighborhood level. This becomes the new basis on which people survive and begin to relate as well as the basis for new forms of activism and movements. The *piqueteros* are a direct consequence of this process. Although they

¹⁵⁰ I describe this process in the introduction of the dissertation.

made their name on the highways, their organizations had always been based in the neighborhoods where they lived. In fact, the *piqueteros* are not the first form of Argentine neighborhood activism in the age of neoliberalism. They were preceded in the 1980s by Ecclesiastical Base Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, or CEBs) who engaged in land occupations, starting many new neighborhoods in the southern and western regions of the *Conurbano* (Aristizábal, 1988; Merklen, 1991; Vommaro, 2009) as well as the *basista* movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Prévôt Schapira, 1999).

Before analyzing the FOL's place-based organizing strategy, however, I will focus on a part of the social movement literature that deals with the study of place and social movements, specifically the debate on militant particularism. I argue that scholars have developed a negative conception of place-based movements or what are often called forms of "militant particularism" partly because their understanding of place is rooted in a bounded and static conception of place. Even when place-based organizing is not dismissed outright, most of the literature on place-based movements leads to a false debate between 'universalism,' understood as scaling up and connecting with other movements, versus 'particularism,' which is understood as navel-gazing or getting lost in the territory. Borrowing a dynamic and dialectical conception of place from Doreen Massey, however, can help us resolve the dilemma and appreciate the importance of place-based strategies like the FOL's complex territorial work.

Militant Particularism and the Politics of Place

One of the first articulations of a place-based politics as a strategy for socialists comes the wide-ranging writings of Raymond Williams, who theorized the importance of place in many of his essays, novels and interviews (Williams, 1989). Williams sought to understand how place could bring together different struggles of the working class. By doing so, he was thinking against the grain of most analyses since space was usually understood to be what separated working class movements and precisely what they were so often unable to overcome. As he put it in an interview in 1984, the goal of place-based organizing was to develop a “truly popular programme with mass support from below. Then, a popular front, as it were, might be a feasible proposition. I think territorially based popular mobilization may be a way forward here” (1989: 240). In this passage, we can see Williams linking territorial activism with the creation of a “popular front.” The purpose of working in a particular territory, for Williams, was not to ignore the broader struggle or to get lost in the particulars of the territory but to build “mass support from below.” From the perspective of Argentina, Williams’ conception of a socialist form of place-based organizing sounds almost prophetic. The *piquetero* movement represents a form of territorially based popular mobilization that became massive during the years of the crisis and remains one of the country’s largest social movements.

This connection between place-based organizing and a popular front or a mass-based movement is especially important in light of how others would take his focus on place in the opposite direction. David Harvey’s (2001) influential analysis of Williams’ politics of place put the concept of “militant particularism” at the center

of the discussion and led to a dilemma between the particular and the universal.¹⁵¹

This dilemma referred to the challenge of local movements, or “militant particularisms” to scale up without losing their particular, local characteristics. As Harvey writes:

The move from tangible solidarities understood as patterns of social life organized in affective and knowable communities to a more abstract set of conceptions that would have universal purchase involves a move from one level of abstraction – attached to place – to another level of abstractions capable of reaching out across space. And in that move, something was bound to be lost (2001: 173).

This dilemma between the particular and the universal is at the heart of Harvey’s discussion of Williams’ concept of militant particularism. One either has “tangible solidarities” at the local level or one has “another level of abstractions capable of reaching out across space,” but these two levels appear to be irreconcilable since one cannot move from one to the other without losing something. Although there is a fundamental tension here, the solution appears to be in the “more abstract set of conceptions” that have “universal purchase.” Rather than local movements themselves coming together to form a larger movement or coalition, it appears that the answer will come from above, from those who have a grasp of the right kind of abstractions, the ones that can reach across space without getting stuck in place.¹⁵²

Harvey’s reading of Williams has been so influential that almost any discussion of place-based organizing has had to grapple with this dilemma between the particular and the universal. Many scholars have taken up the language of

¹⁵¹ Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, I would argue that the concept of militant particularism is not at the center of Williams’ thinking on place, as Harvey argues.

¹⁵² My critique here is influenced by Featherstone (2005) who points out that this solution privileges the role of “intellectuals or broader political movements” (262) while also understanding intellectuals as positioned outside of local struggles or movements (263).

“militant particularism” to discuss place-based activism as parochial, narrow and self-interested (Ashman, 2004; Chatterton, 2005; Routledge, 2003). In this conception, place-based activism is just as likely to be conservative and exclusionary as it is to connect with other movements and lead to the development of something larger. Others, with a more optimistic view of place-based activism, argue that forms of militant particularism can “feed into more universal demands” (Amin, 2002: 396). Others simply re-appropriate the concept as a “genuine militant particularism” in “which local and regional particularities are highly valued and at the same time a universal message (freedom and solidarity) is sent” (Souza, 2006: 329). Whether one makes a positive or negative assessment of place-based activism, it would appear that the mere discussion of it leads to an obligatory debate between universalism and particularism.

This political impasse, I contend, is the result of a particular conception of place. Following Doreen Massey’s critique, this is the view that understands “place as bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity” (1994: 5). When we think of place in this way it very easily leads to “exclusivist claims to place,” whether these are nationalist, regionalist or localist (4). This understanding of place assumes self-interested, parochial and even conservative communities that would be hard-pressed to cooperate with other places or communities. Understood in this way, place appears to have the kind of qualities that lead us away from building a broad, mass-based socialist movement. A focus on place supposedly impedes solidarity with others by forcing us to focus first

and foremost on those in our own bounded locality and accentuates geographical divisions that already exist among workers instead of building class-consciousness across space. This bounded conception of place is the reason why place-based activism or militant particularism is controversial. The false dilemma between the universal and the particular is rooted in our very conception of place.

If space and place, however, are understood as social relations that are not frozen in place but integrated with time, as Massey argues, then place becomes a dynamic rather than a fixed concept. Place becomes, as Massey calls it, a “particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings” (5). A popular neighborhood in Argentina that is known as the “terrain” of a particular political broker, for example, does not have to be understood as a place where people are locked into clientelistic relationships. Clientelist practices are but one element or moment in an entire world of relations and understandings. Further, the social relations of the terrain itself can provide the means of challenging these relationships and contesting the territory. But there is also no reason to assume that the relations which constitute a place are all contained within the place itself. As Massey says, there are “relations that stretch beyond” (5). A broker, after all, has a relationship with the state. The impetus to re-arrange social relationships in a popular neighborhood might come from outside the neighborhood. In fact, much of complex territorial work involves precisely this dynamic. There is nothing necessarily illegitimate about this. The neighborhood is always already part of the outside world and the outside world is always already inside the neighborhood.

Beyond justifying place-based activism, I argue that Massey's relational conception of place helps us understand how place-based activism can be productive of new political identities rather than simple building blocks that serve pre-established interests. A relational conception of place allows us to remove the automatic association between place and the small, narrow and self-interested, the characteristics associated with militant particularism. In this alternative understanding of place, local struggles do not come together through a process of abstraction in which the local and particular characteristics get lost, but rather in and through place itself and in a productive and dialectical process of mutual influence in which new identities and solidarities are created. For example, people from a working-class neighborhood could come together with people from a more marginal, popular neighborhood and realize that they have interests in common. After they work together for a while, the women from both neighborhoods create a gender commission to work on some of these common interests. This process does not require for these groups to lose their original neighborhood or class-based identities, but it does create new identities and solidarities, such as feminism, that complicate the original starting point in which two neighborhood groups come together. Rather than abstractions that reach out across space, as Harvey would have it, these are concrete connections that made in place. And instead of losing something in this process, something is new is created, namely, new identities and solidarities. Massey's relational conception of place provides us with the missing link between a politics of place and the larger "popular front" that Williams hoped to achieve.

One way to describe this productive element of space is what Massey calls “dynamic simultaneity.” This is a space that produces new social effects because of the way it is organized, literally because way that “phenomena have been placed in relationship to one another” (Massey, 1994: 4). It is this dynamic simultaneity that I see in the neighborhood activism of the FOL. Thus, the new identities and forms of activism that I found in the FOL could be understood as what Massey is calling here the “new social effects” that are provoked from a particular form of spatial organization. From this point of view, place-based activism is not simply activism located in places but activism that uses spatial organization as a tool to provoke new social and, I will add, political effects.

Massey’s anti-essentialist conception of place is also a feminist argument that makes connections to the way that feminists understand the construction of subjectivity as anti-essentialist (7-8). Beyond this understanding of subjectivity, however, Massey’s re-theorization and recuperation of place also rescues the many place-based movements, which, even if not explicitly feminist, are often led or largely made up of women (Harcourt & Escobar 2005). This is the case of the *piqueteros* in Argentina as well. Although many of the leaders are men, the *piqueteros* are place-based movements that are largely made up of women. Significantly, having a bounded or “essentialist” conception of place makes it easier to dismiss place-based movements in the same way that having an essentialist conception of identity allows one to dismiss women’s movements or other movements as “identity-based”

movements.¹⁵³ Thus, place-based movements face the same criticism that “identity politics” does, namely that they fracture solidarity by promoting a narrow and exclusionary identity positions. In fact, in the *piquetero* movement, place and identity literally come together since the movement is built on what Brazilian scholar Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2006) calls “territorial identities,” identities that are rooted in the neighborhoods where people live. I deal with these neighborhood-based identities here and the complex ways they relate to the identity of *piquetero*. The recuperation of place, then, is important for appreciating the importance of women’s movements as well as movements that are built on territorial identities, two characteristics that apply to the FOL and to the *piquetero* movement in general.

This re-theorization of place is particularly useful in my analysis of the FOL’s territorial activism. I argue that the FOL is not only a place-based movement but one that also produces new identities. As I will describe below, the FOL understands its activism as an opportunity to interpellate and politically engage many different kinds of people: unemployed workers, precarious workers, regular workers, neighbors, women, youth, students, teachers, etc. Part of what allows the FOL to bring such different people and activities together is the fact that it produces its own space in the neighborhood. This productive and creative act, which produces a concrete and autonomous space of convergence in the neighborhood is what differentiates the FOL from workplace or other forms of activism. Finally, the FOL understands its

¹⁵³ I put “identity-based” in quotation marks because I consider identity to be fundamental for all social movements. It would indeed be an anomaly to find a movement that was not based on a particular identity.

territorial activism as a bottom-up strategy that promotes *autogestión* rather than the top-down imposition of a homogenous and institutional space. That is, the creation of space is understood as a social, collective act, which is not only oriented towards the needs of the neighborhood but involves the residents themselves. Of course, in theory this approach cannot be imposed from above and must remain open to the specificity of the territory, but in practice forces of centralization, finite activist energy and uneven knowledge and experience among movement members produce a tension between bottom-up and top-down forces within the movement.

The FOL and Complex Territorial Work

The formal strategy of complex territorial work is laid out in detail in an internal document of the FOL from 2005 titled “The problem of constructing complex territorial work.”¹⁵⁴ Internal documents such as these are usually written by individual activists to be discussed and debated at activist assemblies. This process allows for a particular idea to be elaborated before all the activists of the movement discuss it. If the activists agree and the document is ‘accepted,’ then it becomes part of the common understanding of movement strategy. These types of documents are not discussed at delegate or neighborhood meetings because of their abstract character, and for this reason they do not obtain any official status as criterion of the movement.¹⁵⁵ Rather, they only become a kind of common understanding, but only

¹⁵⁴ The document was technically written before the formation of the FOL in 2006, while the group was still known as the Movement of Workers Norberto Salto (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Norberto Salto*, or MTNS).

¹⁵⁵ While the militants continually try to bring more political discussions to the delegate and neighborhood meetings, they are also fully aware the limitations of their *compañeros*, as well

in the minds of the activists. The delegates and *compañeros de base*, for example, have not discussed these texts and usually have more rudimentary understandings of the concepts and the history they contain. Since these documents are not official binding rules, there is no debate about the specific language they contain. The text itself can be found, but it is not exactly ‘on hand,’ and it is the common understanding, rather than the text, that is a part of the ongoing discussions among activists. After a while, a text such as this one can serve as a historical marker. If complex territorial work needs to be re-theorized, one might dig up the original document to see how it was understood in 2005.

This particular document makes the case for a form of neighborhood organization by providing a historical analysis of this type of activism in Argentina. It tells the story of how neighborhood clubs and activities were originally developed by anarchists and socialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The text mentions organizations such as: mutual aid associations, science associations, unions, cooperatives, sports clubs and neighborhood social clubs (*sociedades de fomento*). It argues that due to the destruction of the welfare state in the latter part of the twentieth century, the unemployed, much of the working class and even some intellectuals no longer have access to the services and functions that these associations and organizations provided. It further argues that to the extent that these services continue to exist they have turned into capitalist enterprises or they have

as the danger of militants getting into political debates in front of other *compañeros* who are simply reduced to the role of watching.

been incorporated into the state and made part of its clientelist machine (*punterismo político*). While recognizing the difference between the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the text proceeds to outline a strategy to develop “territorial centers” in order to prepare the working class in a wide array of tasks including: education, mutual aid, and self-defense. As part of the inspiration for this strategy, the text cites Lenin: “No problem of the working class is foreign to us.”¹⁵⁶

In this document, we can find the theoretical nucleus of complex territorial work as a strategy. Although the document is not explicitly theorizing space or territory, we can observe that the strategy it outlines is fundamentally spatial. It requires the creation of cultural centers that are located in neighborhoods. The location of these centers in the neighborhood is part of what allows them to be intimately linked to the lives of the working class. Secondly, these centers are meant to be open to “all of the problems of the working class.” This intention to be open to all the problems of the working class, however, assumes that these problems are already known and understood, an issue that becomes more prevalent within the FOL as some activists turn to feminist, environmental, educational or cultural forms of activism. Third, the territorial centers require a certain level of autonomy, what the activists refer to as “relative autonomy,” if they are to avoid the fate of the institutions created by anarchists and socialists. In 2005, the year the document was written, the *piquetero* movement was in crisis. Many of the largest *piquetero* organizations had either agreed to cease mobilization in exchange for government resources or their

¹⁵⁶ Original: “ningún problema de la clase obrera nos es ajeno”. (Lenin).”

leaders had literally joined the government of Nestor Kirchner.¹⁵⁷ In this context, the FOL put new emphasis on their territorial strategy as a way to remain combative and resist cooptation and clientelistic pressures.

In a map of the FOL from 2012,¹⁵⁸ there is another short description of this territorial strategy. The section at the top right labeled “Territorial Development” (*Desarrollo Territorial*) reads as follows:

Because the territory is where the distinct members of our class coexist. We have to overcome the limits of the more corporate axes that they impose on the movements, such as [social] programs and merchandise, to instead make demands for health, education, housing, public services and the culture of the community; by fostering resistance that includes the unemployed, the employed, the casualized, neighbors, students, etc. Activities like political training workshops on worker’s rights, open to the community are also tools to be utilized. In this way we develop a way of organizing that goes beyond the limits of our movements, with the aim of constructing bodies of popular power (*organismos de poder popular*).”

In this short text we can see that complex territorial work is about overcoming the “limits” of cooptation and clientelism that are ‘imposed’ on these types of movements through “[social] programs and merchandise.”¹⁵⁹ Part of the strategy for accomplishing this is to make demands that go beyond work and basic resources. It was the “unemployed workers” of the original *piquetero* movements that fought for work and basic resources, demands to which the government responded with “programs and food staples.” By engaging in complex territorial work, the FOL seeks to go beyond the framing of “unemployed workers” by including the employed and the casualized as well as neighbors, students and others. The idea is that as the

¹⁵⁷ For a review of the *piquetero* movement after 2003, see (Pereyra et. al., 2008).

¹⁵⁸ See figure 5.1 below.

¹⁵⁹ These are the same social programs that I analyze in chapter three as forms of neoliberal workfare.

demands become more complex, it will force the government to respond differently. Working the territory and opening up the movement to different kinds of subjects, then, allows the FOL to go “beyond the limits” imposed by the state and construct “bodies of popular power.”

The phrase “bodies of popular power” is unique and striking one because it takes the important concept of popular power, which is currently being debated among many grassroots movements of Latin America,¹⁶⁰ and gives it a material existence in the community. The plural element of “bodies” also gives this phrase a democratic element. This material and plural conception of popular power makes it concrete and accessible, rather than distant and located in the state. Further, popular power is clearly understood here as a social relation that must be constructed rather than as a thing or an institution that can be taken or seized. The construction of territorial centers in the neighborhoods and the democratic practice that animates them are the constitutive elements of these bodies of popular power.

Perhaps the closest relative to these bodies is the concept of “soviets” and the famous slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” In fact, many of the activists in the FOL are council communists (*consejistas*) and thus, directly inspired by Lenin, Gramsci and the democratic possibilities of workers’ councils. Here, however, the central element is not located in the workplace, like the workers’ councils, but in the people (*pueblo*), a concept that, as we can see, the FOL understands as fundamentally heterogeneous. Thus, while it is clear that the FOL is drawing on a tradition of

¹⁶⁰ For example, see (Acha et. al., 2007; Agacino, 2015; Mazzeo, 2006).

socialist thinking that centers the worker, it is deploying this conception in a territory where ‘the worker’ is only one of many different kinds of subjects that inhabit the terrain. This is partly why the FOL’s territorial activism has led to the development of new identities and forms of activism. I begin my analysis of these new forms of activism by providing a spatial description of one of these territorial centers.

The Galpón Cultural

The heart of the southwestern region¹⁶¹ of the FOL is the *Galpón Cultural*, a cultural center located in Claypole, in the southern region of the *Conurbano*, about two hours from the city of Buenos Aires. The *Galpón* traces its history back to 1993 when it was located in the garage of one of the early activists. In 1999, the *Galpón* joined the *piquetero* movement and formed the Movement of Unemployed Workers (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados*, or MTD) Claypole.¹⁶² It has been at its current location since members occupied a strip of land next to the San Francisco Stream in 2001. Like most cultural centers of the movement, the *Galpón* stands on land that was acquired through an illegal occupation (*toma de tierra*).¹⁶³ On a regular day at the *Galpón* one can find the Popular Kindergarten in operation, which uses the

¹⁶¹ During my fieldwork most of this region was known as the Movement of Workers Norberto Salto (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Norberto Salto*, or MTNS). Here I will use Southwestern region in order to use the language of “regional level” and avoid the confusing language of “movement level,” in which has “the movement” can refer either to the MTNS or to the FOL. The new naming system that uses the cardinal directions also highlights the integration and spatial re-organization of the FOL according to spatial coordinates.

¹⁶² Between 1999 and 2003 the MTD Claypole was one neighborhood within the larger MTD Solano, which was also organized territorially. In 2005 it changed its name to the Movement of Workers Norberto Salto (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Norberto Salto*, or MTNS).

¹⁶³ Although this kind of strategy is used to acquire land, it is different from the *asentamientos* of the 1980s, which sought to acquire land in order to establish entire neighborhoods.

first and largest room as well as the kitchen and the outdoor space in front of the center. The back room of the *Galpón*, equipped with a large desk and with many books on the shelves, is usually the site of an assembly of some kind. Behind the kitchen, there is a screen-printing cooperative known as *Serigrafía en Movimiento*. Another work cooperative, a blacksmith workshop known as *Herrería Sur*, has its own large structure behind the cultural center. Behind the *herrería*, there is a foundation for a building that is the future home of the Popular High School (*Bachillerato Popular*).¹⁶⁴ Once a week, in the large outdoor space in front of the center one can also find the neighborhood assembly of the *Galpón*. On evenings and weekends, the large front room and open space in front of the center can be used for community events, such as dances or birthday parties.

At the very back of the long terrain there is a house where the *casera*¹⁶⁵ of the *Galpón* lives with her three children. The movement provides free housing to the *casera* since she is always “on call,” as it were, to perform any task that could be needed with little notice. The *casera/o* performs an important function at each center since they watch over the center when nobody else is there and since they are able to open and close the center when others do not have the key. In fact, the first job I was given after arriving was to join the construction crew and build a house for the *casero* at *Las Cavas*, another neighborhood of the southwestern region. At *Las Cavas*, where

¹⁶⁴ While construction on this building was on hold during the time my own fieldwork, I noticed it was completed when I visited again in 2015.

¹⁶⁵ The best English translation would be “steward” or “caretaker” but I will use the Spanish here since neither of these terms suffice.

neighborhood children would frequently damage or destroy parts of the cultural center when no one was around,¹⁶⁶ building a house and establishing a *casero* in order to protect the center was an urgent task.

The *Galpón*, which is more established than most centers in the FOL, also has a second story. This second level had been a living space that was converted into an office during my fieldwork. This is where the *casera* used to live before the movement finished construction of her house. After it was converted, one of the rooms remained a living space for those members who were in-between housing situations.¹⁶⁷ While the back room of the *Galpón* had functioned as a de-facto office, part of the argument for putting an office upstairs was that the kindergarten downstairs was too noisy. Another benefit of having a particular space dedicated to this purpose was that the movement could make the claim to the municipality that the *Galpón* could function as a “*Polo Productivo*.” *Polo Productivos* are locally based offices that the municipality uses to manage the paperwork of those who work under social programs. Among other things, hosting a *Polo Productivo* allows for movement members with social programs¹⁶⁸ to sign-in to work at the *Galpón* instead

¹⁶⁶ This destruction, as it was explained to me, was due not so much to any kind of negativity towards the movement but simply out of boredom. Since the kids of the neighborhood often had nothing to do and the cultural center was often left alone, the kids took advantage of this to entertain themselves by punching holes through the hollow bricks with which the cultural center was constructed.

¹⁶⁷ In fact, this is where I lived when I first arrived to do my fieldwork.

¹⁶⁸ The social programs, which began to be implemented in the 1980s, became large-scale in the 1990s and grew in importance in the 2000s, are mandatory work programs for welfare recipients. They are designed by the government for the popular classes and implemented at the neighborhood level. I explore the politics of the social programs in further detail in chapter four.

of traveling to another site. This makes it easier for members to work for the FOL and easier for the FOL to manage its own paperwork, giving the FOL more control over the conditions of its labor.

In this quick sketch of the *Galpón*'s spatial characteristics, we can see that complex territorial work is not simply place-based activism but activism that produces its own space in the neighborhood. First, thanks to the militant appropriation of space, there is a physical space in the neighborhood that is devoted to fulfilling the “needs” of that neighborhood. Just like the theory of complex territorial work demands, the center works to solve various problems of the working class: work, childcare, education, meeting space and social space. Further, the space itself is autonomous.¹⁶⁹ While the FOL is not the official owner according to the state, they are the *de facto* owners without having the obligation to pay rent or owing any political debts to politicians or political brokers (*punteros*). It is partly because the FOL has produced its own space in the neighborhood that it has been able to achieve political independence. This independence, along with their ability to take state resources without falling into clientelist practices, allows them to further construct these spaces, building new schools, small cooperatives and even building houses and starting new neighborhoods for their members.

One element that is easy to take for granted here is the appropriation of ample space. Without ample space, one loses the crucial function of simultaneity. In other

¹⁶⁹ While these centers can be described as autonomous, the FOL cannot be described as an “autonomist” movement. I address the fetishization of autonomy in chapter four.

words, without sufficient space it would be impossible to have each of the cooperatives functioning while assemblies take place in the meeting room or outside. If these things could not occur simultaneously the FOL could not keep all of these different projects; it would have to choose between them. A popular kindergarten that operates only one day a week does not serve its purpose, and a shirt-printing or blacksmith cooperative will go out of business if it cannot function every day. The production of ample space, then, allows for the movement to be multifaceted and to and support its claim of acting to solve “all the problems” of the working class. If the working class does have multiple problems, as the FOL asserts, then only a multifaceted movement devoted to tackling multiple issues at once, has a hope of addressing them.

It is in this ample space that we see what Massey referred to as the “dynamic simultaneity” of space. As cultural centers like the *Galpón Cultural* are inhabited, in other words, as people begin to work, play, meet, cook, clean, socialize and engage many other tasks in real space-time, these centers start to develop a certain life of their own. Put differently, the space of the cultural center begins to act upon the members. For example, many members of the Popular Kindergarten take their own children to the kindergarten. These members are effectively raising their children in the same space where they work, socialize, and attend gender commission and other political meetings.¹⁷⁰ In fact, it is through work and socializing that many of these

¹⁷⁰ As I briefly noted above, many place-based movements, even if not explicitly feminist, are often led or largely made up of women. This is a central claim of Harcourt and Escobar’s (2005) analysis.

members heard of the gender commission and began to participate. It is not uncommon for some of these members to spend the entire day at the *Galpón*, working, watching their kids, participating in a meeting and then sticking around after they are done to drink mate with their *compañeras*. The intimate and close-knit nature of this participation makes it unsurprising that there are many social events held at the *Galpón*, including those that extend beyond the strict political mission of the organization. The new social effects in this case are the ways that members are able to build relationships while cross-pollinating the different projects of the movement, thus allowing new identities and new forms of activism to emerge.

It is this complex dynamic, made possible through space, that allows the FOL to politicize the different aspects of the lives of their members. This is how a demand-oriented (*reivindicativo*) and class-based movement, which began as a way to demand work from a government that was increasingly becoming absent in the context of mass unemployment and casualization, began to develop novel forms of organization and even new identities in the neighborhoods where they were based. The new identities go beyond the original class-based identity with which they began when they called themselves *piqueteros* or “unemployed workers’ movements.” By organizing in the neighborhood they politicize their place-based, territorial identities. At the same time, by creating create new forms of activism, such as a gender or youth commission,¹⁷¹ they also politicize other identities.

¹⁷¹ Of course, I am not asserting that gender, youth, educational or environmental activism are “new” forms of activism. But I am claiming that for the popular classes in Argentina, immersed as they are in Argentina’s strong class-based (*classista*) tradition and lacking

By going beyond the class-based demands for work, the FOL exposes a new population to cultural forms of activism that typically appeal to a different kind of activist, usually from a more privileged background. It is the territorial center that brings together different kinds of activists and identities, from those who are typically interested in “socialism,” to those more interested in cultural, or other forms activism, to those who joined the movement out of pure necessity and discovered politics or cultural politics through the movement. But even more important than this, is how these different kinds of activists are changed in the process of participating. Whether, one joined the movement as a “activist” who was already political or whether one joined the movement out of economic necessity, it often happens that within the movement one finds a new way of understanding themselves and a new way of being an activist. The production of new identities within the movement, as I argue below, even challenges the movement’s original class-based identity as a *piquetero* movement.

Territorial Identities

While the cultural projects of the southwestern region of the FOL tend to concentrate around the *Galpón Cultural*, part of the project of complex territorial work is to extend this work into the other *barrios* of the movement. During my fieldwork I witnessed one *barrio*, known as *San Ramón*, make a transition from a small, rented locale to a larger, appropriated space next to a park. After occupying

access to education and alternative ideologies, these are very much new ideas and forms of activism.

and securing the location, the activists from the movement built a cultural center that was much more similar to the *Galpón* than their previous site. Significantly, when I interviewed some of the members from the neighborhood they said that now that they had a new location they would be able to accomplish much more. Here, Ernesto, Flavia and Teresa describe the difference between the two locations:

E: We didn't do anything [at the old location].

F: To what we have right now, we improved. We improved big time.

T: We couldn't do anything [at the old place] because we had to wash the dishes in the bathroom. That's not a place to have a soup kitchen.

F: And we didn't have any other choice.

T: There wasn't any other choice. It [the old location] was the only place we found. But here the bathroom is going to be separate and in front we're going to have a big shed (*galpón*), a separate kitchen, the kids are going to have room to study, all of those things: academic tutoring, [etc.].¹⁷²

What is significant about these comments is the way in which the aspirations these members have for the new site reveals their understanding of what a 'proper' cultural center looks like. They recognize that their previous location that was too small for a proper cultural center, and they describe what they will be able to do with more space. It is likely that their reference point as they speak of their aspirations is the *Galpón Cultural*, with its functioning bathrooms, separate kitchen, and ample meeting space. Although one does not need to have a grand vision of a complex cultural center to explain why one would not want to wash dishes in the bathroom, the

¹⁷² T: No hacíamos nada...

M: A lo que estamos ahora, levantamos. Una banda se levantó. Levantamos un montón.

E: No podíamos hacer nada porque en el baño teníamos que lavar los platos, todo. Ese no es un lugar para un comedor.

M: Y no quedaba otra ...

E: Y no quedaba otro el único lugar que encontrábamos. Pero acá ya el baño va a estar aparte, y más delante vamos a tener un galpón grande, la cocina aparte, los chicos [van a tener lugar] para estudiar. Todas esas cosas. Apoyo escolar... (Interview with "Flavia," "Teresa" and "Ernesto" 6/15/2013).

inspiration provided by the *Galpón* is evident here. In addition to the use of the word “shed” in this passage, I often heard Flavia refer to the cultural center at *Agustín Ramírez* as a “cultural shed” (*galpón cultural*) rather than a “cultural center” (*centro cultural*), as if “*galpón cultural*” was not the name of one particular cultural center but the standard word for cultural center.¹⁷³ Further, these are some of the most experienced members of *San Ramón* and they have been to many meetings at the *Galpón Cultural* throughout their years in the movement. They are familiar with its layout and the way that it functions. Thus, they have not only come to understand what a ‘proper’ cultural center should look like, but have applied these standards to their own cultural center and have begun the process of building and creating this space.

After occupying a new location and building a new center, *San Ramón* not only started to offer new activities in the neighborhood, but it also voted to begin to use the original name of the *barrio*, *Agustín Ramírez*, once again. Agustín Ramírez was a local activist and member of a local Ecclesiastical Base Community with which he led land occupations in the area during the 1980s. He was assassinated for his activism in 1988 by local landowners. This identification and recuperation of a local activist and history is a perfect example of what Souza means by his term “territorial identities” (2006). By recuperating the name of Agustín Ramírez, the *barrio* was

¹⁷³ An old activist of the *Galpón* discussed this dynamic in an old interview that movement members provided for me. He says that he finds it “comical how other centers now have the name “Galpón Cultural,” as if it was an homage or a registered trademark” (Interview with Ernesto 12/11/2007).

connecting with its local, territorial identity. Ultimately, the reactivation of *Agustín Ramírez*, both its identity and its activity, was rooted in the active appropriation and production of space.

Despite the FOL's ambitious and extensive engagement in particular neighborhoods, there are instances of centralization. For example, the movement meeting (*reunión del FOL*), where the activists from the different regions come together to discuss movement-wide issues, is probably the most important decision-making body. Significantly, the *reunión del FOL* is not held in a neighborhood cultural center but in a rented office in Buenos Aires. Although other members of the movement such as delegates and *compañeros de base* often attend the movement meeting to speak about particular issues, they usually do not stay for the duration of the entire meeting. Even if these members were to stay, the discussions at this meeting require knowledge that goes beyond the FOL and extends into the vast range of popular social movements and other kinds of strategic political issues.¹⁷⁴ In this way, even the FOL, which dedicates much of its resources to building power at the neighborhood level, simultaneously replicates forms of power that contradict the goals of this strategy.

In the rest of this chapter I analyze the new identities and forms of activism produced by this territorial strategy in detail. I begin with the new forms of cultural activism that have developed in the neighborhood, the gender commission, the

¹⁷⁴ Despite all of its problems, this meeting is of course fundamental to the unified action of the entire movement.

popular high school and the water workshop. I follow this with a discussion of the changing identities of the activists, both those who enter the movement as activists and those who become activists in the process of organizing. Finally, I reflect on the original *piquetero* identity of the organization and how this has been decentered by new emphasis on complex territorial work. I conclude by reflecting on the importance of place and spatial strategies in the FOL's praxis, especially with respect to discussions of horizontalism and militant particularism.

Comisión de Género

Perhaps the most dynamic neighborhood project of the FOL is the gender commission (*comisión de género*). This a group of women who meet weekly to discuss patriarchy and organize themselves to confront the issues that women face both in society and in the movement. The group engages in a wide-array of actions, including: educational meetings, coordinating with the larger "Campaign Against Violence Against Women" organized by *COB La Brecha*,¹⁷⁵ fundraising to travel to the annual National Encounter of Women (*Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres*), and participating in local state programs that are oriented towards women's needs, such as the Women's House (*Casa de la Mujer*) and the Women's Municipal Council Local Board of Non-violence (*Mesa Local de No violencia de Almirante Brown del Consejo Municipal de la Mujer*).

¹⁷⁵ Current of Base Organizations (*Corriente de Organizaciones de Base*, or COB) *La Brecha* is a national and multisectoral organization to which the FOL belongs. It is made up not only of territorial organizations, like the FOL, but also cultural, student, professional, and worker organizations. The FOL acts in coordination with *COB La Brecha* for larger political campaigns.

One of the challenges of establishing a group like the gender commission with women from the popular classes is that many of the issues they discuss are not abstract but commonplace in their own lives. Domestic violence, for example, is not an abstract concept but a real experience for many of these women. Thus, consciousness raising in the gender commission means more than just learning or challenging oneself intellectually but also confronting painful life circumstances. The same men who are violent in the home are usually the ones who encourage their partners to leave the movement.¹⁷⁶ Thus, even before they begin to think critically about patriarchy, the members of the commission have had to fight for their right to simply continue participating with the organization. One can imagine how beginning to think and reflect on patriarchy as part of the gender commission can make belonging to the movement while living with these partners an even more difficult task. This has led many members to leave their partners because of what they had learned in the commission. In fact, leaving one's partner was such a frequent necessity that the members of the commission began to joke about the way that it saw breakups as "good news."

While participating in the gender commission created challenges, it also gave women the opportunity to empower themselves. This empowerment went beyond theoretical concepts to practical knowledge and even direct action. One of the educational meetings, for example, provided an in-depth explanation of how to file a

¹⁷⁶These men were not only threatened by their partners learning about patriarchy but they were also threatened by the fact that their partners could earn a wage in the movement and become the primary breadwinners of the family.

restraining order. At this meeting the members created a map of the surrounding area in which the key institutions were flagged and especially unfriendly police stations or other agencies were signaled. This map activity is a good example of how the FOL's spatial praxis goes beyond its own neighborhoods.

These activities take the territorial element of the FOL's activism even further than the conception of complex territorial work as it was originally outlined. By mapping the neighborhood, and flagging friendly or unfriendly agencies, the commission produces knowledge of the social world outside of the neighborhoods that make up the movement. Rather than limiting them to their own neighborhoods, territorial activism makes these women more aware of their surrounding territory. On the other hand, the example of abortion points to a slogan that has become popular in the larger women's movement and at the National Encounter of Women (*Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres*) that "the body is the territory" (*el cuerpo es el territorio*). Part of the popularity and legitimacy of this phrase derive from the legitimacy and importance of territorial work in general in Argentina. By claiming that *el cuerpo es el territorio* the women's movement is able justify an entirely new realm of activism as part of the "territorial work" that is already an established and legitimate form of activism in Argentina. Although the FOL did not begin as a feminist movement, its focus on place and its production of space led to the creation of a dynamic gender commission that was able to extend the concept of territorial activism, giving it an explicitly gendered dimension.

Although the gender commission and the issue of gender has gained visibility within the FOL, members of the gender commission have had to fight their male comrades for this recognition. Members of the gender commission described to me how the commission was not taken seriously in its early years and how the topic of gender was often bypassed during neighborhood, regional and movement meetings. The great irony here is that women had always made up the vast majority, more or less three-fourths, of the larger *piquetero* movement, but the vast majority of its leaders were men, a characteristic which also applies to the FOL. Although the commission has made progress in raising consciousness around these issues, gender is still considered a “women’s issue.” For example, I heard the gender commission referred to as the “women’s commission” by activists with a long trajectory in the movement. It is also telling that almost all of the FOL’s educational materials are rooted in a class-based perspective that does not highlight gender or patriarchy. During my fieldwork, a very active and longtime activist of the FOL ended up leaving the organization after one of the most important leaders of the organization had protected a member who had been accused of beating his wife.¹⁷⁷ Many members of the gender commission were similarly outraged but decided to focus their attention on raising the consciousness of the women in the commission rather than directly confronting the leadership. These members were able to use this event to

¹⁷⁷ Before this member left she wrote a seventeen-page letter to her comrades in which she justifies her decision to leave the FOL. This document includes a critique not only of the FOL’s gender politics but also undemocratic dynamics the movement meeting, which I describe further below. Although this member left the FOL, she remained a part of *COB La Brecha*.

bring the issue of patriarchy to the attention the larger movement. As I was finishing my fieldwork, the commission was in the process of developing a proposal that would require the men of the movement to be take workshops on issues of patriarchy and feminism.

Bachillerato Popular

Another project that is very active in the movement is the Popular High School (*Bachillerato Popular*). The *Bachillerato Popular* of the FOL draws its origin to 2009 when the idea was brought up at an activist meeting. Both adults and adolescents from the neighborhood who did not have a chance to attend or finish high school are able attend the *Bachillerato* and earn official high school diploma when they complete their studies.¹⁷⁸ The classes of the *Bachillerato* are given at night and include childcare so that students who work during the day or have children are able to attend class. Although the project of running a high school involves a significant amount of work, coordination and planning, all of the teachers volunteer their time and none receive any pay. In 2013, during the time of my fieldwork, the *Bachillerato* was run out of a local school while construction of the permanent school at the *Galpón* was on hold. After returning in 2015, however, I saw that construction of the school had been completed. Just like the other projects of the movement, the ideal for the *Bachillerato* is for it to have its own space.

¹⁷⁸ While some *Bachilleratos* have ties with the state and are able to provide official high school diplomas, others, like the one I am describing here, provide official diplomas through their connection to another *Bachillerato* with an official status.

From the perspective of the activists, the *Bachillerato* was another way to organize members of the working class in the community. It was already known that education was one of the needs of this community, and since the movement of *Bachilleratos Populares* had been around for a few years, the format was already known. While the *Bachillerato* of the FOL got off to a quick start, and has since become a large project, it has maintained a semi-independent relationship with the rest of the movement. In fact, although the *Bachillerato* is part of the larger movement, a separation between “the movement” and the “the *Bachillerato*” tends to persist. For example, although a representative from the *Bachillerato* used to come to the regional meeting of the FOL, this practice has been discontinued since it involved a large time commitment that was not essential to the functioning of the school.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, none of the organizers of the *Bachillerato* regularly attend the activist meeting of the FOL apart from those who were activists of the FOL before the *Bachillerato* was established. This has contributed to a separation between the *Bachillerato* on the one hand and ‘the movement’ on the other. In a certain way, this separation represents the two poles of the movement: the demand-oriented (*reivindicativo*) work on one side, which includes not only the protests and marches but also cooperatives and work crews, and the neighborhood-based work on the other side, like the *Bachillerato* and the gender commission, which extend into the cultural realm. For some members, especially those who joined the movement in the earlier

¹⁷⁹ One member of the *Bachillerato* complained to me that he used to sit through hours of delegates talking about social programs and marches just to be able to provide a short update about the school.

years and are more accustomed to the more basic ‘*piquetero* dynamic’ of mobilizing, making demands to the state and distributing state resources, the cultural projects can appear as foreign entities.

Despite the ‘foreignness’ of the *Bachillerato* and its semi-independent status, the activists of the movement constantly encourage members to study at the school and finish their high school degree. In part, education is seen as a good in its own right, and, in part, activists seek to raise the educational level of the delegates and other members so that they can more easily perform the administrative tasks of the movement that involve basic arithmetic and other skills. One poignant example of this commitment to education was when activists from the movement created an “annex” of the *Bachillerato Popular* in *Las Cavas*, one of the *barrios* of the movement. This was necessary because the members of *Las Cavas*, who live in an especially poor and segregated area, refused to leave their own neighborhood to attend the *Bachillerato*.¹⁸⁰ When the school was in their neighborhood, the *compañeros* would study, but when the subject of transitioning to the main location next year came up, the teachers got the same pushback. This was a difficult issue because it took substantial activist energy to give special classes to only a few students at a different location. At the same time, as one of the activists of the movement said during an activist meeting, it was extraordinary that they had succeeded in getting these *compañeros* to study at all. This issue remained

¹⁸⁰ The segregation between neighborhoods, not only between rich and poor but between poor and very poor, is a consequence of the neoliberal fragmentation and segregation of space that I describe in the introduction.

unresolved during my fieldwork and is a good example of the tensions and limitations of complex territorial work.

Taller de Aguas

One of the FOL's most novel community projects is an environmental project known as the Water Workshop (*Taller de Aguas*). The *Taller de Aguas* is a group of university students who travel nearly four hours from northern Buenos Aires to Claypole in order to clean and restore the San Francisco Stream, which is directly adjacent to the *Galpón*. These are students of the natural sciences who are also activists that understand their work not only in technical-scientific terms but also in terms of a social commitment. Their political project involves cleaning and restoring streams collectively, with people from the community, while also transmitting their knowledge to these people. Because of their approach, the *Taller* needed to connect with a territorial movement like the FOL, which already has connections with the people of the area. After the *Taller* made contact with the movement, the FOL arranged to have work crews meet the students on Saturdays to work alongside the students and allowed the students of the *Taller* to leave their tools in the shed. Sometimes the students would work in the stream with movement members and on other occasions they would conduct workshops in which they taught the *compañeros* about the pollutants in the stream and how what their strategies were for restoring it. As the students from the *Taller* told me in an interview, they would not be able to do this work without connecting with a territorial organization like the FOL. Indeed, the FOL provided not only the connection to the people in the community, but all of the

material supports for their activism, including the storage and cleaning space, the space and resources to provide power point presentations, as well as access to the stream.

The collaboration between the *Taller de Aguas* and the FOL had some of the same limitations as other unique projects within the FOL. During the activist assembly, for example, I noticed that some members had to constantly remind other activists about the existence and importance of the *Taller de Aguas*. On one occasion the students of the *Taller* had traveled four hours from northern Buenos Aires all the way to the *Galpón* in Claypole only to find an empty cultural center with nobody to let them in. While the FOL's approach to territorial work was open to environmental work, it had difficulty incorporating this issue into its daily practice, despite the fact that the work had been effectively delegated to another organization. Once again, the characteristic divide between the class-based and demand-oriented activism, on the one hand, and neighborhood-based cultural activism, on the other, is visible here.

Activist Identities

The activists of the FOL also undergo their own processes of transformation as part of their long-term and in-depth work in the neighborhood. A common phrase among the activists of the movement that signals long-term and in-depth approach is “thinking with your feet in the mud” (*pensar con los pies en el barro*). This slogan, which represents the embodied and spatial politics that the FOL practices and strives to achieve, has several possible connotations and interpretations. First, the activist is understood as a thinker, a conception that is not seen as contradictory. But further,

the activist is an embodied and geographically located thinker. Importantly, this slogan goes further than to say one must have their feet on the “ground.” The activist must have their feet in the “mud,” which represents the various neighborhoods of the movement since many of these *barrios* are so marginal that the streets are not paved. On a practical level, thinking with one’s feet in the mud means to be intimately aware of conditions in the neighborhood, not just on an objective level but on a subjective level that understands how the *compañeros* think, what they want, what they are worried about and so forth. We can also observe how the image of feet in mud implies rooting oneself in the territory. This conception of rooting oneself is aligned with the commitment to a long-term process of social change that works from the bottom-up. The phrase also evokes a sense of politics as messy and impure in the positive sense, like the English phrase “getting one’s hands dirty.”¹⁸¹ In this sense, it emphasizes the way that activists are thinking while doing instead of simply thinking about what other people are doing. This is why the activists of the movement participate actively in one or more neighborhoods or in a particular neighborhood project. This is also known as a form of “participation at the base” (*una instancia de base*). Of course, this stipulation is in place so that the FOL’s more politically active members are not discussing movement issues in ways that are detached from the reality of the *barrios*. However, the other benefit of this structure, which I heard many activists discuss in interviews, is that the process of participating in the *barrio*

¹⁸¹ I want to thank Deborah Gould for pointing this out to me.

allowed the activists to confront their internalized classism and challenge their own preconceptions of the popular classes.

One notable example of this type of long-term engagement with the neighborhood is Daniel's experience in *Las Cavas*. During my time in the field, I accompanied Daniel, who had been working in *Las Cavas* for several years. Daniel's schedule involved working with the construction crew four days a week, to help build the home for the *casero* of the cultural center. On top of this, he attended the neighborhood meetings in order help facilitate or explain issues related to upcoming marches or complex matters relating to movement criteria. However, what was most rigorous about this process was its social aspect. Daniel got to know the members of *Las Cavas* in an intimate way. He developed relationships not only with the members of the movement but with their children and with others in their family. In a certain sense, he was almost part of the neighborhood and even partly took on the identity of the neighborhood.¹⁸² At one point Daniel had a crisis because one of the members of *Las Cavas*, someone a few years younger than him who Daniel had met as an adolescent, told Daniel that he needed to stop bossing everyone around. Daniel knew that the member had only said this to get under his skin since Daniel was the first to proudly say that there was "no boss." However, it had hurt him sufficiently to prompt the question of whether or not to continue working in the neighborhood. Later at the

¹⁸² In fact, Daniel was so involved with *Las Cavas* that at a militant meeting I heard someone refer to him as a "*Cavista*," which is, of course, an allusion to "Chavista." At the risk of reading too much into this joke, I later thought that perhaps it even makes an oblique reference to Daniel's devotion, implying that his devotion to *Las Cavas* is comparable to the devotion that the *Chavistas* feel for Hugo Chávez.

activist meeting Daniel's *compañeros* were able to convince him not to leave. Part of the logic that they used was that he had witnessed so much interpersonal violence in the neighborhood that he actually should have expected to become the target of it at some point. One comrade even suggested that this episode only meant that Daniel actually "belonged" in the neighborhood, a comment that drew laughter from the rest of the assembly. This laughter, while of course relieving tension and helping to convince Daniel, also demonstrates the knowledge of Daniel's comrades. Although they did not work in *Las Cavas* the way he did, they also had known the same comrades for years, and they were fully aware of how difficult of a place it could be.

On the other end of this dynamic, we can find examples of *compañeros de base* who are from these marginal neighborhoods and are politicized through their work with the FOL. While these examples are less frequent as well as more long-term processes, they promise a more participatory and inclusionary dynamic. For example, in the southwestern region of the FOL, there was a member who joined the movement out of material necessity and is starting to become an activist. This member joined the movement as an adolescent after taking part in a land occupation in 2006 in one of the most marginal neighborhoods of the movement. Although she did not have any previous experience in activism or politics, she became actively involved in the FOL. By 2013, during the time of my fieldwork, she would often attend and contribute to the activist assemblies despite the fact that she was the only activist who had not finished her high school degree and all her fellow comrades all had some level of higher education. For someone from such an extremely humble

background, this was a significant achievement, which all of the other activists recognized. Of course, the purpose of such deep engagement at the neighborhood level is precisely to initiate this process and develop activists who can one day take on the task of not only becoming delegates of their neighborhood but also activists within the FOL. At the same time, the other activists noted that she was very inconsistent in her activism as she had often left or threatened to leave the movement because of personal problems with other members.

This example reminds us that building power from below and at the neighborhood level involves a process of educating members and allowing them to develop activist skills and capabilities. Some activists in the FOL, especially the Guevarists,¹⁸³ would call this creating the “new man” (*hombre nuevo*), in reference to one of Che Guevara’s most famous ideas. Others might refer to it as a process of transforming subjectivities. Beyond their differences in terminology, however, these activists celebrate the progress of this particular activist, but they also very soberly point out how many years it took to get even this far. Whether we make a positive or negative assessment of this type of activism, it is evident that working with people in this deep way is a necessarily long-term and contradictory process.

One particularly illustrative example of changing activist identities is the way the way that some movement members relate to the identity of “*piquetero*.” In

¹⁸³ Although I have not focused on it here, the three main political ideologies or tendencies among the FOL’s activists are council-communists (*consejistas*), Guevarists (*Guevaristas*) and anarchists (*anarquistas*).

several instances I heard members say that they no longer identified as with this term.

This came up, for example, in my discussion with Gustavo:

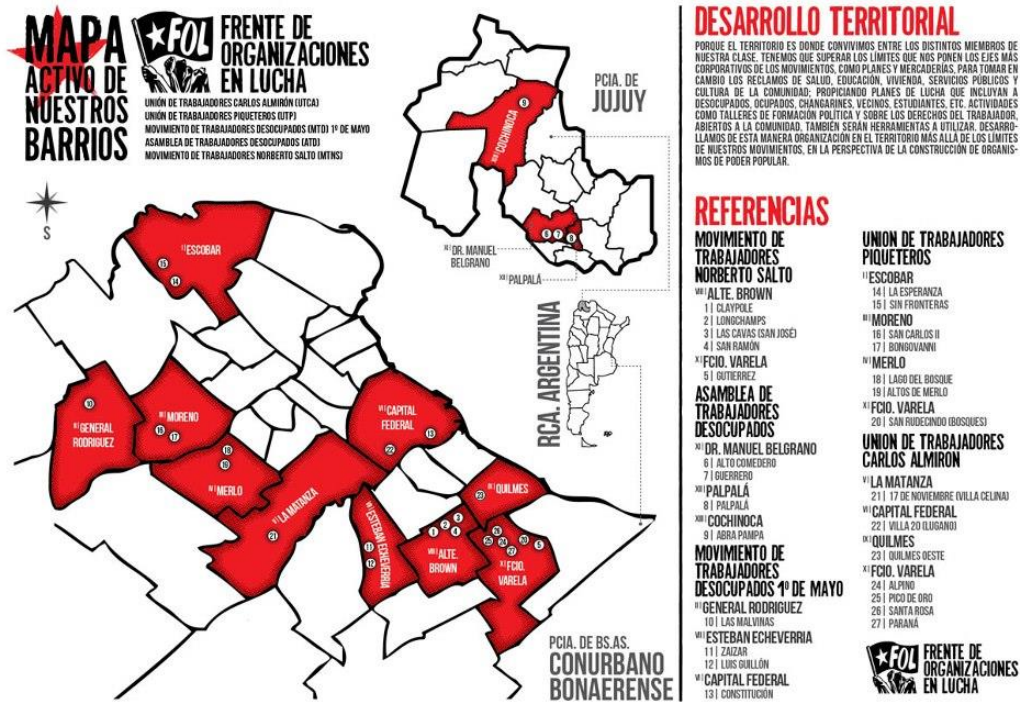
Last night I had the opportunity to go to a space of the *compañeros* from *1 de Mayo*, which is what I was talking about earlier. They've got the blacksmith cooperative and now they've set up the pizzeria. And a whole bunch of people come by because the signs of 'organization without bosses' get their attention. And they start to ask questions. And the *compañeros* have been working in the neighborhood for a long time but nobody saw that. But now they've started noticing and I think that a lot of people who want to work with us are going to start coming by. They didn't come by before because they didn't know about it. Since the people are used to their own cultural habits that they've always done, it [working with us] is a new option, and they still mistake you and they might say, "Oh, you're a *piquetero*." And I consider that we *were piqueteros*. But I don't consider us to be *piqueteros* anymore even if we use a roadblock when we make demands.¹⁸⁴

It should be understood that there are many in the movement who still identify and identify strongly as *piqueteros*. Further, the roadblocks and marches still play a central role in the movement both in its strategy and identity. However, Gustavo's comments do signal an important shift that has happened over time. If in the past the movement was known for being in the street, it is now its extension in the neighborhood that is key, even if this is not as visible to the public. And this shift in identity is intimately linked with space. Where the identity of the *piquetero* was forged in the street, a far more nuanced production of space has occurred in the neighborhood. It is here that the activities of the movement became so diverse that it

¹⁸⁴ Original: Anoche tuve la oportunidad de ir a un espacio de los *compañeros* de 1 de Mayo que es lo que comentaba hoy. Tienen la herrería, ahora hicieron la pizzería. Y muchísima cantidad de gente se acerca porque le llaman la atención los carteles que hay de organización sin patrón y demás. Y empiezan a preguntar y ellos están trabajando en el barrio hace mucho tiempo, pero nadie lo veía eso. Pero ahora se empezó a ver y yo creo que se va a acercar seguramente gente que va querer trabajar con nosotros ahí. Porque por desconocimiento no se acercan. Como nuestros *compañeros* están muy acostumbrados culturalmente a los manejos que se hicieron siempre, es una opción nueva, y todavía yo digo te confunden por ahí y te dicen "ah, sos *piquetero*." Y yo considero que nosotros éramos *piqueteros*. Yo ya no considero que somos más que seamos *piqueteros* por más que vayamos a hacer un corte para reclamar (Interview with "Gustavo" 8/17/2013).

loosened the centrality of this identity derived from a street-based form of direct action. Those who discover the movement in the neighborhood, then, like Gustavo, do not necessarily adopt the identity of the *piquetero*. Here we can see how the production of space is intimately connected with the production of new identities. As the FOL engaged in the production of space in the neighborhoods, this practice then changed the social relations of the organization that initially understood itself as a *piquetero* movement. While the identity of *piquetero* remains strong, there are an increasing number who are not interpellated by this term and have a different relationship to the movement.

Figure 5.1: The *barrios* of the FOL (2011-12).¹⁸⁵



¹⁸⁵ Both Figure 5.1 and 5.2 were downloaded from the FOL's website (www.fol.org.ar). As maps on the website, they do not get a lot of circulation among the members of the movement. However, at one point I was shown a physical version of this map that was hanging in the *Galpón*, leading me to assume that it was used to develop a spatial awareness among the members of the movement. Although it is outdated at this point, I include figure 5.1 because provides a more precise picture of the location of the different neighborhoods.

Figure 5.2: A current map of the *barrios* of the FOL showing the movements that joined the FOL in 2013.



Figure 5.3: A fundraising event held in the space in front of the *Galpón Cultural*.



Figure 5.4: The *Taller de Aguas* working in the San Francisco Stream.



Figure 5.5: The new cultural center of the *barrio Agustín Ramírez*. Sign reads: “Galpón Cultural Agustín Ramírez Matrícula N° 26344.” The registration (*matrícula*) number is there to lend an air of legitimacy to the center, but it is simply fake.



Conclusion

The FOL's territorial activism allows us to get a sense of the potential of a spatial strategy at the neighborhood level. By producing their own spaces in the middle of residential neighborhoods and attempting to organize around all of the different needs of the working class, the FOL opens up their praxis to the complexity of everyday life. As described above, both elements of this strategy have their contradictions. Despite the desire to build popular power from below, this strategy is threatened by top-down forms of power that are ultimately rooted in the sheer difficulty of a project that aims to transform the subjectivities of the popular classes. As a result, there are examples of centralization that are evident in the construction of the cultural centers and the assembly structure and decision-making process. Similarly, the strategy to open up the movement to "all problems of the working class" partially succeeds but also tends to assume knowledge of these problems and to relegate cultural projects, such as gender, education and environmental activism to a secondary status below the primary concerns of work-based struggles. In both cases, a dynamic develops that is contrary to the stated intent of the FOL's territorial activism. Yet, as I emphasize above, these contradictions, while perhaps inevitable on some level, do not lead to an unavoidable dead-end. Rather, the strategy of engaging the territory, producing space and interpellating different kinds of people can lead to unforeseen outcomes such as the emergence of new identities and forms of activism.

If there are tensions and contradictions in the FOL's territorial activism they do not stem from a loss of particular identities or the difficulty of bringing together separate 'militant particularisms' as the critics of place-based organizing argue, but rather from the long-term and contradictory process engaging of engaging in a bottom-up approach and transforming activist subjectivities. Despite these difficulties, however, the FOL's territorial activism is productive one. It is able to produce a unique form of space that also leads to the production of new identities and new forms of activism. These new identities are created and strengthened by their inclusion and participation in the FOL. Were it not for their participation in the FOL, for example, the activist identities in *Agustín Ramírez* or *Las Cavas* would not even exist. The case is similar for the new cultural forms of activism that have developed in the neighborhood. While the *Bachillerato* or the *Comisión de Género* have a certain level of tension with 'the movement,' they also owe their existence to the movement. If something is lost in the process of bringing militant particularisms together through "theoretical generalization," it is because movements do not come together through theory or abstraction but through praxis. The advantage of the FOL's territorial praxis, despite the flaws in its theory or practice, is that it remains open to the territory.

In this chapter I have argued that the FOL's territorial activism does not inhibit the process of building a larger movement, but rather produces new identities and forms of activism that make a larger movement possible. By engaging the territory and interpellating different kinds of subjects, the FOL creates spaces of

dynamic simultaneity that take the movement beyond the expectations of its most experienced activists. The FOL's strategy produces not only space but new identities and forms of activism. It is in the way that people have produced and inhabited these spaces, giving them life, that we can begin to see the potential of this spatial strategy. If there is a tension between a socialist politics on the one hand and a place-based politics on the other, it does not have to be a paralyzing tension. In fact, it can be a tension that generates new possibilities.

Conclusion

“You gotta work it though cause everyday ain't Saturday fool”
Timothy Jerome Parker, *First in Flight*

New political organizing models in the twenty-first century have only become more important since the global economic recession of 2008. Especially with the rise of the Arab Spring, the Spanish *Indignados*, the US Occupy Movement and others, social movements are gaining attention as forces that can profoundly alter the political landscape. Beyond the constantly changing locations of struggle, there is a narrative about how these movements have borrowed new organizing models from movements in Argentina (Kiersy and Vastri, 2016; Lorey, 2014; Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012; Sitrin and Azzelini, 2014). Sometimes this narrative emphasizes the role of horizontalism autonomy, *autogestión* or “societies in movement,” a framing that my dissertation research complicates and extends. Social movements in Argentina often figure centrally in these tropes about political organizing models. As I argue in the introduction, many analysts use the popular uprising of 2001 and other movements as a way of promoting their own ideological investments even while disavowing these investments.

Rather than looking at Argentina through the lens of new movements and uprisings happening around the world, we would do better to flip the script and do a close ethnographic study of contemporary Argentine movements, several years removed from the moment of uprising. This type of study is more important, not less important, given the time that has passed in between 2001 and 2012-13. Looking at contemporary Argentine movements can tell us about the after-life 2001, the after-life

of the “*Que se vayan todos*” (They all must go),¹⁸⁶ while giving us a clue about the after-life of other uprisings.

Although I have not emphasized it, the uprising of 2001 is present in the movements I analyze. The biggest clue came in the epigraph to chapter four. The first line of the song that the FOL would sing was “I come from the 20th of December.” As I explain in the chapter, the fact that the FOL narrates its history in this way shows that the FOL roots part of their militant identity in the uprising. It is especially significant that they continued to sing this song in 2013 because to do so was to explicitly defy the politics of that historical moment. In 2013, the height of the *piquetero* movement had long past and the government was declaring the last ten years to be the “victorious decade.” By rooting their identity in the uprising of 2001, the FOL declares, against the government and against the grain of history, that there has been no victory. The victorious decade is simply the casualized decade. The previously unemployed are now simply precarious workers. There is no victory in the governments of the Kirchners, only political brokers. The spirit of 2001 lives on.

If we look at the rest of the song, the spirit of 2001 is presented not so much as a call to repeat 2001 with another uprising, but as a call to “organize,” and “struggle.”¹⁸⁷ It does not say that it will resist with ‘autonomy’ in the ‘neighborhood’

¹⁸⁶ This became the most important slogan from the uprising. Its meaning has been extensively debated, but it is generally meant to refer to all politicians.

¹⁸⁷ I come from the 20th of December/ I come from the Pueyrredón Bridge/ We are the independent left/ Fighting for the revolution/ We are going to struggle/ We are going to organize/ Against all the brokers of the Kirchners/ With popular power/ Resisting in the streets/ Constructing from below and to the left

but rather with “popular power” and “in the streets.” Similarly, the song does not mention uprising or the phrase “*que se vayan todos*,” but it does mention “revolution,” and it embraces the tradition of the “independent left.” The last line of the song, “constructing from below and to the left,” argues that the task is to construct something. In fact, this phrase is attributed to the Zapatistas and has been embraced by autonomists world-wide. But, of course, in the Zapatista version, the word “construct” is not there. The political position is on point, but the politics are missing.¹⁸⁸

One might argue that the FOL’s song distorts the “original intention” of the uprising and the meaning of the “*que se vayan todos*.” This argument, however, necessarily leads us into a search for origins and a debate about which interpretation is the ‘true’ one. Rather than looking for the true meaning, we should recognize that all interpretations of the uprising are simply interpretations. The question, rather, is which interpretations are alive and show promise. The interpretation of the FOL, as well as the other *piquetero* groups of the AGTCAP who also sing this song, emphasizes the process of organizing, struggling and building popular power. It is an interpretation that identifies deeply with 2001 and with Dario and Maxi who were assassinated on June 26th of 2002 in the march that sought to cross the Pueyrredón Bridge. The tumultuous days of the early 2000s in all of their pain and hope are in this song and they are also in the everyday struggle of a different historical moment.

¹⁸⁸ Although I am not an expert on Mexican or Zapatista politics, I took as good news the recent declaration that the Zapatistas will be proposing an indigenous woman for president, if only because it changes the dynamic of the movement. For more, see (Oikonomakis, 2016).

That is because, through song, these days are brought back into the present moment and made into the motivation for today's struggle.

I am not arguing that the autonomist interpretation is not alive, but rather that it is undead. It is an interpretation that one can still find the texts that commemorate 2001. It is in the recent English translation of Colectivo Situaciones' *19 & 20* (2011) and the special edition of *Herramienta*, both of which were published ten years after the uprising (2011). It is in the texts of Marina Sitrin, Ana Dinerstein, John Holloway, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. It is an interpretation that, like the ghosts of IMPA, refuses to die, and because of this, it can be found in many texts. It has impressive textual and scholarly life. The movements, on the other hand, have moved on.

The way to exorcise the ghost of autonomism is to recognize the importance and the proper place of autonomy in political organizing. Autonomy is at the center of debate right now on the left and for good reason. The largest mistakes or failures of the left, such as Stalinism, can be attributed to a lack of autonomy and autonomous organizing. The current discussion of autonomy and the resurgence of autonomous organizing on the left since the appearance of the Zapatistas, the alter-globalization movement of the early 2000s and the more recent, post-recession 'wave' of the alter-globalization movement, are a breath of fresh air for the left and have been desperately needed. The problem comes when autonomy becomes autonomism, in other words, when autonomy is fetishized and becomes an ideology unto itself.

The same thing could be said about the rupture. Autonomists have made much of the rupture represented by the popular uprisings that have overthrown presidents and dictators in Latin America and the Middle East. These events are key, and there are many, especially those who celebrate the progressive governments of Latin America, who fail to recognize these uprisings as the real precursors of the left turn.¹⁸⁹ The *Que se vayan todos* in Argentina, the *Caracazo* in Venezuela, the Water and Gas Wars in Bolivia and the *Que se vayan todos* in Ecuador are historical turning points. It is clear that these moments are not purely negative but are also productive, as we saw in Argentina with the immediate development of the neighborhood/popular assemblies and new synergies between movements. Regardless of how transformative these moments are, however, they are necessarily unfinished projects that leave loose ends. Indeed, governments and political parties often take advantage and coopt the creative political energy these moments produce. This makes it all the more urgent that social movements are organized and ready to defend and build upon these spontaneous creations. The moment of uprising is fundamental, but, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, we still have to go to work the next day.

The FOL and IMPA

Instead of looking at social movements in Argentina through the lens of new movements around the world, this dissertation takes a close, ethnographic look at two specific organizations as they existed in 2012 and 2013. As the previous chapters

¹⁸⁹ George Ciccariello-Maher (2014) provides a useful analysis of the left turn in Latin America that connects the turn to the left in government with the uprisings that preceded these governments.

make clear, the work of building movements and organizations, even successful ones, is long, slow and difficult. Both the FOL and IMPA have been organized since the late 1990s and they remain precarious movements. Their endurance, however, is an enormous accomplishment, and there is much to learn from their success. I argue that much of their success is rooted in the production of space and the practice of *autogestión*.

By producing their own space, each of these movements have been able to create more resources. The spaces of IMPA and the FOL are uniquely different, and there are also key differences between them in the way they are organized. For this reason, I emphasize the way that IMPA is able to gain legitimacy as part of an “external” strategy. However, as a spacious building with important social and spatial divisions between the members, IMPA continues to struggle with hierarchy and fractured spaces. Since the FOL does not have a spacious factory, its spaces are tighter. But this also leads to what Doreen Massey calls the dynamic simultaneity of space, the way that the organization of space can produce new social and political effects. The FOL’s focus on street-based direct action also puts an emphasis on those in the organization who are most in need of resources. Although there are social divisions in the FOL between activists and regular members, these divisions are less severe than they are in IMPA.

Autogestión is also a process that looks significantly different in each organization. At IMPA there are significant problems with *autogestión* at the level of the worker’s cooperative. While this method of organization presumably functions

smoother in the different social projects, it is clear that these projects are disconnected from the productive workers and that IMPA cannot say that it brings all of its different parts together in one decision-making process. While the FOL is more democratic, it has its own problems that come from divisions between projects and the difficulty of politicizing the base of the organization. Precisely because the FOL is, in many ways, earnestly trying to politicize its base, we can see just how difficult this project is. On the other hand, there are also tendencies leading to centralization of the decision-making process and the relegation of cultural politics to a secondary status.

One fundamental difference between these organizations is that the FOL directly confronts the state, while IMPA plays the game of legitimacy. Of course, the FOL relies on social programs for its funding and is thus forced to engage in mobilization if it wants to maintain its autonomy. This confrontation allows us to see the way that autonomy can also be a way of engaging the state. But, importantly, IMPA's strategy of seeking legitimacy is also a way of engaging the state in a subtler way. And this has paid off since in November of 2015 it won legal status. Further, IMPA's popular high school, just like the popular high school of the FOL, is able to provide official degrees because of its connection to the state. In neither case, then, do we see the kind of strict autonomy that refuses to engage with the state.

Although these movements operate within a historical and political context that is particular to Argentina, their strategies are still relevant to movements across the world. Specifically, the way I have theorized these strategies as the spatial

politics of *autogestión*, could be useful in many contexts. The spatial element of the latest wave of movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain and the United States is undeniable. But these spatial practices have yet to be connected to a strategy understood as the production of space. In the cases where space is emphasized, it is usually associated with a strategy to create autonomous spaces. But this concept, as one might imagine, is wrapped up in autonomism and all of the problems and weaknesses that this theoretical framework creates. By focusing on movements that are not living the excitement of the moment of uprising, we have seen the place where horizontalism and autonomy come up against the need for organization and long-term struggle. The spatial politics of *autogestión* provides us with a way of thinking through the complexities of how movements endure and change the way we live our lives.

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