

Introduction: Moving beyond crisis by recovering work and recomposing production

On Dec. 19-20, 2001 Argentina was the site of a massive popular uprising that brought the country's dramatic economic and political crisis of the 1990s and early 2000s to a breaking point. As responses to the blighting of the lives of Argentina's working classes due to its national governments' acquiescences to the neoliberal reform policies prompted by the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions over the past three decades, organized movements of the unemployed, neighbourhood assemblies, human-rights groups, and – the group at the heart of this paper – the worker-recovered enterprises movement (*movimiento de empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores*, or ERT¹), have been contributing to the creation of myriad autonomous spaces for social renewal. Especially visible since the political events of Dec. 19-20, and responding to Argentina's collapsing neoliberal economic system, the creative social transformations spawned by these grassroots social movements have, most notably, helped articulate “other possibilities for living.”² Indeed, as Peter Bell and Harry Cleaver write, “crisis is, from the point of view of the working-class subject, a moment not of breakdown but of breakthrough....”³ For workers, Bell and Cleaver remind us, “the most important thing about capitalist crisis is that, it is, for the most part, the consequence of their struggles[,]...important experiences in the development of the working class as revolutionary subject.”⁴ Through forms of direct democracy and community-based social initiatives, the potentially revolutionary subjectivities that compose these movements are directly addressing Argentina's traditional institutions' inability to contain historically high levels of underemployment, unemployment, and poverty. And within the conjuncture of Argentina's most recent economic and political neoliberal crisis, the ERT

¹ This is the name given to the current workers' self-management movement in Argentina by Andrés Ruggeri, Carlos Martínez, and Hugo Trincherro, *Las empresas recuperadas en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2005).

² Italian radical social theorist Maurizio Lazzarato asserts that the “political event” organically emerges out of crisis moments, coalescing individuals and collectivities via creative and life-affirming actions spurred on by the realization of what is intolerable with the historical conjuncture they live in. From within these benchmark political-historical moments of crisis and conflict “new possibilities for living” get articulated through the “event,” such as Argentina's mass protests of Dec. 19-20, 2001. Often brought on by the cyclical and conjunctural crises of capital, the political event may not only place capital's contradictions into sharp relief, it may also reveal openings for recomposing life for those of us oppressed by constituted power. Crisis moments that reverberate into and inspire events such as “The Battle for Seattle” in 1999, Quebec City 2001, and the *Argentinazo* of Dec. 19/20 should not be understood as merely momentary and fleeting reactions to the inevitable glitches and cracks present in constituted power. Rather, the event is the intensified and collective eruption of alternative actions, images, and statements within an ongoing social struggle against established forms of power. It is the creative climax in the long narrative of the class-based conflicts instigated by the preponderance of the commodity form and the political-economic structures that uphold the circuits and logics of exchange and accumulation and that trench the social divisions of labour with their inherent inequalities. Hence, the event that emerges out of these crisis moments begins to rouse the questioning of dominant values and of constituted power and articulates other possibilities for life. (Maurizio Lazzarato, “Struggle, Event, Media,” in *republicart.net* (2004), p. 1, Oct. 2005 <http://www.republicart.net/disc/representations/lazzarato01_en.htm>).

³ Peter Bell and Harry Cleaver, “Marx's Theory of Crisis as a Theory of Class Struggle,” *The Commoner*, No. 5, (Autumn 2002), pp. 58-59, 1 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.thecommoner.org>> (emphasis in original).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

movement, in particular, is crafting promising, surprisingly long-lasting – and workable – alternatives for its workers and cultural producers.

Eight years into the ERT movement, it is becoming more and more clear what paths it is beginning to provisionally yet promisingly map out for Argentina's working classes: paths leading to creative ways of recomposing society with signposts that include self-managed, cooperatively organized, and socially politicized collectivities of workers. In particular, the ERT movement is not only showing that workers *are* capable transforming traditional production processes, it is also showing that workers possess the capacity to redefine the meaning of production itself within rubrics that lie outside of the capitalist workplace, such as the production of culture, barter-based production and exchange practices, and the viability of a "social economy." One of the threads I will attempt to clarify throughout this paper is how an emergent consciousness of these capacities unfolds among some ERT protagonists within moments of crisis and in the thick of the challenges they face in the struggle for recovering and securing jobs.

Having said this, it must be clarified up front, however, that to paint each ERT within the movement as uniformly shaped would be a mistake if one looks at the multiple ways that each recovered workspace and, indeed, even each individual worker within the movement, tackles the challenges of self-management. Nevertheless, while each ERT's practices of workspace reclamation and the subsequent unfolding subjectivity of each ERT protagonist are far from uniform and, indeed, still in various stages of becoming, the practices of recovering workspaces and jobs from the ravages of neoliberal policies that have benefited the establishment while immiserating the rest of Argentine society are hinting at common tendencies that are beginning to earmark the possibilities for social transformation. The tensions between the ERT movement's creative practices and the system's recalcitrance in the face of the changes being experimented with by each ERT are further points I aim to work out throughout this paper.

Argentina's ERT movement is also showing how it is that a working class consciousness gets immanently sketched out in lived experience. It shows us that a collective working class consciousness is multilayered, in an already-always state of becoming, provisional. That is, the (re)formation of what might loosely be called a working class consciousness amongst the collectivity of workers that make up the ERT movement is not, hearkening back to Merleau-Ponty's words in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, predetermined by an "idea" of what "the working class" should be. Rather, something resembling a collective class consciousness that might be undergirding the forms of productive practices being experimented with by the ERT movement emerge *intersubjectively* from the entanglement of ERT protagonists' subjectivities that "co-exist in the same situation and feel alike, not in virtue of some comparison, as if each one of [them] lived primarily within [themselves], but on the basis of [their] tasks and gestures" – as individuals whose lives are "synchronized" together and that "share a common lot"⁵ within the socio-economic crisis that Argentina still finds itself in. And what are the commonly shared lived-experiences of this "common lot" amongst Argentina's workers that piqued during the temporary collapse of the neoliberal model in the years that spanned the last turn of the century? Similar experiences of fear at being relegated to the growing ranks of the unemployed and the poor, a growing awareness of the

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 444.

intensification of their exploitation in the wake of dwindling salaries and benefits, feelings of helplessness and the loss of dignity as job security eroded, countless stories of domestic crises and the breakdown of families as a result of this increased precarization of life, feelings of anger and frustration as thousands of firms were closing and declaring bankruptcy or were idle in spite of historically high rates of unemployment, and myriad other calamitous experiences Argentine workers were suffering everyday because of an abusive and callous system that remained inert to their increasing immiseration and precarization.

The ERT movement can thus be seen as emerging out of the capitalist crisis that Argentina was, and still is in many ways, ensconced in. Drawing on Karl Marx's ethico-dialectic assault on capitalist modes of production in *Capital Vol. 1*, the movement can be seen as being a direct response to the deeply antagonistic tensions between the conflictual desires of two broad oppositional classes (a conflict that was put into sharp relief by the unfolding neoliberal crisis of the late-1990s): the desire of the Argentine labourer to control his or her labour-time, to ensure a secure life, to shorten his or her working day, and to carve out larger spaces for self-actualization, versus the capitalist's compulsion to control and maximize the use-value of the commodity of labour-power that he or she has purchased.⁶ Concretely illustrating Marx's famous passage in *Capital, Vol. 1* concerning the clash of "rights" between "the class of capitalists, and collective labour,"⁷ and blending it with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of the existential becoming of class-consciousness, the emergence of the ERT movement can be viewed as emanating *out of* the clash between the working class and Argentina's "class of capitalists," and the latter class's compulsion to accumulate at all costs, even if it means impoverishing and precarizing the working conditions of labourers. What ultimately convinced thousands of Argentine workers to risk their very lives in the process of recovering their workspaces and jobs were the deleterious repercussions they directly felt in their everyday lives because of the incessant drive of Argentina's capitalists, in light of the imminence of micro- and macro-economic collapse, to exploit as much surplus-labour as possible in order to mitigate the effects of the implosion of the country's economy. The responses of some members of Argentina's "collective labour"⁸ to this capitalist compulsion to accumulate at all costs emerged into the practices of occupying firms, the struggle for self-management, and democratized workplaces.

Framed within the dual goals of historically contextualizing and exploring some of these developments in Argentina's recent experiments with workers' self-management for English language readers, in this paper I set out to explore the following themes: In Part 1 I briefly touch on the history of the movement and begin to draw out a few of the most important social, political, and economic factors that motivate workers' occupations and the recoveries of their workspaces. As well, I outline some of the most common practices of self-management that have emerged from within the movement's struggle for workers' autonomy. In Part 2 I grapple with two interrelated tension-filled themes currently being worked out by the movement: First, I appraise a few of the most

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 235.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

important microeconomic, organizational, and political successes and challenges that are beginning to trend across the ERT movement. Second, I assess a few of the possibilities for social change growing out of the movement, the new forms of production being experimented with, and the transformation of working life that the movement is spearheading. In Part 3 I explore some of the links being forged between the Argentine ERT movement and comparable workers' movements across Latin America.

Throughout this paper, I implicitly – and at times explicitly – suggest that amongst the most promising possibilities being experimented with by the ERT movement is – as nascent and as contradictory as it is at times – nothing less than a re-articulation of, if not a direct refusal to submit to, key aspects of the social relations that subject labour to the competitive and exploitative whims of capital within the context of Argentina's reality as a developing country caught in the web of globalized capital. That is, within its socio-historical context, the ERT movement is, in various ways, tentatively pointing to paths beyond, while, at the same time problematizing the very practices of, wage-labour itself. In particular, I will show throughout the paper that, what some of the protagonists of the ERT movement in Argentina are fundamentally challenging is the proprietors' right to extract and exploit the surplus value created by workers' expended labour-power over and above the right of the worker to own the products of his or her labour. Looked at from another angle, the ERTs' protagonists are thus primarily struggling for the right workers to control the means of production and to ultimately self-direct their own working lives. What I will attempt to show here is how this challenge is being played out in a socio-political context that sees the despoliation of working lives by the compulsions and crises of globalized capital.

In sum, what I attempt to show in the following pages is that one of the major breakthroughs of the ERT movement in Argentina – sharing many values and practices with the cooperative movement, social economies, participatory economies' practices of work sharing, and intentional communities – is that it begins, however tentatively and contextually-rooted its initial steps are, to articulate ways of opening up the social divisions of labour enclosed within capitalist logics of production and exchange in the context of a developing country's national economy to other values and practices that lie outside of the profit motive and the incessant pursuit of accumulation. As many ERTs are demonstrating, and as I will discuss in subsequent sections of this paper, the alternative values and practices of self-managed production being experimented with by the movement tend to be rooted in communally-minded, horizontally-organized, and non-exploitative modes of social production.

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