

BOOK REVIEW

Workers' self-management in Argentina: Contesting neo-liberalism by occupying companies, creating cooperatives, and recuperating autogestión

Marcelo Vieta

Workers' self-management in Argentina provides a comprehensive insight into the ERT (or worker recuperated enterprise) movement that emerged in the late 1990s against a backdrop of financial crisis. Elevated business bankruptcies and high unemployment were becoming increasingly problematic for workers in Argentina during this period. The ERTs therefore proposed an alternative to the neoliberal corporate enterprise which was increasingly failing its employees, and this alternative was a community-led business model. To date, some 400 companies and almost 16,000 workers have moved to this cooperative model. The book links the movement and its contextual political and economic setting with the experiences of the workers on the front-line, theorising stories and testimonials using the concept of autogestión (self-management) within critical theory. Vieta presents a bottom-up lens within a thoroughly researched setting, but allowing insight from those who experienced the trials and tribulations of recuperating their workplaces to form the basis of the narrative. The book thus offers an important contribution to the literature contemporary labour settings and the potential for workers themselves to successfully contest oppressive neoliberalism.

Vieta develops the book's unique contributions through three main themes. The first of this addresses the lived experiences of workers in the process of recuperating their workplaces. The strategy of 'occupy, resist, produce' is both reiterated and explored within this, relative to the nuances of both the workers and the organisations that they were fighting to maintain. The journeys are mapped and their histories detailed, inclusive of personal, organisational, and legal evolutions that occurred for the ERTs. The book then moves on to credit the challenges and barriers faced during the occupation stages. Whilst relative to sectors, organisation sizes, and other factors, commonly these challenges were inclusive of organisational, political, and social implications ranging from the micro to the macro. Finally, Vieta's discussion focuses on the transformation from employee to self-managed workers, and how practices developed as a result of this change to form the cooperatives they are today.

The chosen methodology is made prominent in the opening chapters of the book, setting a clear tone of the importance of the qualitative and ethnographic approach that Vieta adopts. Three case studies are used within this, all ERTs in Argentina in diverse sectors and contexts, and each providing a distinct narrative. The ethnographic data is rich, welcoming the reader not just to recounted experiences, but also to vivid descriptions of the settings of the ERTs' development

(for example offices and waiting rooms), providing immeasurable depth to the contributions of the book. Excerpts provided within the author's own narrative are evident of lively and data-rich discussions that formed Vieta's qualitative literature, which have been translated accordingly to reflect this, at times choosing to maintain the original language terms with description for authenticity. Interviews with varying group sets – ranging from members of the ERTs, those in more managerial positions, and also local researchers in the field of labour – provided further potential for the scope of the final discussion and conclusions.

One of the most emphatically communicated themes throughout the book, and additionally the one that gripped me the most as a reader, was that of the struggle experienced by the workers of the ERTs. This was not only in the ways that one might expect, such as legally and politically, but also at times physically. Narratives, for example, include worker lock-ins to ensure that machinery was not removed from their premises or taken away by former owners and operational resilience to continue production during periods of the transition. Furthermore, the resounding conclusions included the resilience not just of these workers, but the way communities mobilised to support them and vice versa. The comprehensive coverage not just of the changes that occurred as a business, but also of the experiences of individuals inside and outside of the ERT made a significant contribution to knowledge of the labour and social environment at the time with ongoing relevance to the current day.

Strengths of Vieta's work therefore lie in the ability to provide a vivid and insightful window into democratic revival and ways that workers can mobilise to fight for their autonomy. It was clear from Vieta's methodology and presentation in *Workers' self-management in Argentina* that for both the workers and for Vieta himself the themes were something they were passionate and felt strongly about. This made the book engaging and informative, but also on a more personal level optimistic and inspiring. Furthermore, from zooming out to contextualise the experiences of the ERTs in Argentina, Vieta explores not only wider democratic labour movements, but also the ways in which organisations and communities alike challenge neoliberalism, and indeed how they are successful in doing so.

To conclude, *Workers' self-management in Argentina* provides a powerful contribution to literature surrounding labour movements, democracy in the context of industrial relations, and resistance to neoliberalism in the organisational environment. I would recommend the book to scholars in any of these relative disciplines. Furthermore, Vieta provides a key example of the way that ethnography and qualitative study particular in the field of industrial relations can bring the experiences of workers to the forefront of knowledge production in a way beneficial to wider elements of the discipline.

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