

## BOOK REVIEW

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

Marcelo Vieta

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The topic of recovered enterprise has gained recent attention internationally, especially after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 threatened small and medium businesses across the planet. This makes Argentina's extensive history of recovered enterprises [which in Argentina are referred to as *Empresas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadoras* (ERTs)] all the more relevant for contemporary policymakers, scholars and workers. Marcelo Vieta's recent *Workers' Self-Management in Argentina* is the first comprehensive English-language review of "the largest movement in the world of worker-led conversions of capitalist businesses into cooperatives" (p. xv). Vieta's book will hopefully serve to expose a broader audience to ERTs, by expounding in a structured and exhaustive way their origins, context and contributions to the Argentine political economy. The book is organized into nine chapters, roughly evenly divided between theoretical and empirical foci. The book is a welcome contribution to the study of the phenomenon of workplace democracy that should interest a wide range of readers.

In fact, it is actually quite unfair to call this book *Workers' Self-Management in Argentina*, as its scope is far broader than reviewing this concept in the context of Argentina. In fact, Marcelo Vieta has written two books with this entry: firstly, an analysis of Marxist and other socialist theories on worker-self management, and secondly, an application of this theoretical lens to the Argentine case, with a social history of Argentina thrown in for good measure. There is ultimately something for everyone in this book.

Driven by the slogan 'ocupar, resistir, producir!', Argentina's countercultural ERTs 'have defied their numerical weight and have stepped up to the task of saving companies from closure, addressing under- and unemployment, stabilising local economies, and securing the social well-being of surrounding communities' (p. xv). This has given much clout and endorsement from communities across Argentina, as Vieta points out with countless examples from numerous case studies. Moreover, the more than 400 firms have a survival rate of 'almost 90 percent' (p. 115), putting lie to the notion that entrepreneurship requires the presence of risk-taking investors. Indeed, Vieta's greater purpose with the book is to point to this fact and the resulting opportunities for new 'imaginaries'.


Vieta advances a 'Conjunctural approach', citing Gramsci (p. 521). According to this approach, one grounds one's theory in the existing conditions of a place or time. Thus, Vieta spells out in meticulous detail the conjuncture facing ERTs today, taking a long arc approach that quickly overviews Argentina's modern political history, culminating in the sovereign debt crisis at the turn of the millennium. Born out of this macroeconomic crisis, ERTs 'articulate ways of moving beyond the capital-labour relation, illustrating for working people how to overturn the power vested in employers to determine the working conditions and life circumstances of employees' (p. 551). However, what makes the ERT phenomenon stand out is that it 'ha[s] workers initiating the recuperation of the firm while also fully converting it to workers' collective ownership and administration' (p. 135).

One of the great advantages of the book is its clear exposition of the notion of autogestion, usually translated as self-management. This is an important concept to include, as the English-language literature on labour-managed firms (LMFs) is influenced by some notable examples of failure, such as the U.S. Pacific Northwest's plywood and re-forestry cooperatives. These firms and their experiences, which include the vast majority having been converted by traditional capital-managed firms (KMFs), have helped advance a decidedly negative narrative in the English-language literature on self-management, emphasizing problems like under-capitalization and degeneration (a process whereby an LMF is converted into KMF). Vieta goes to great pains to show that Argentinian ERTs are usually long-living and not restricted to labor-intensive industries. Moreover, while some have adopted more traditional hierarchical management styles, many of those ERTs that arose as a result of class struggle (meaning some element of adverse possession) retain their connection with a tradition of strong grassroots organizing.

Indeed, in keeping with this notion of grassroots organizing, throughout the book, the idea of autogestion is tied to both the Peronist tradition of Argentine political economy as well as to a singular conception of class consciousness, namely the reconstitution of class. In later chapters of the book, these two conceptions are merged into what can ultimately be labelled a phenomenological account of working class custom, theory and history. The book affirms that the construction of the working class proceeds as an endeavour to continuously re-appropriate, reconstitute and reclaim, at distinct conjunctures and with numerous devices, ideas of dignified work, community and of an underlying sense of solidarity with other ensembles of underprivileged workers globally. In this, Vieta places himself in a lineage of Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation*, no less than Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. This is to say that relations of solidarity advance via common experiences instigated by a shared sense of precarity (p. 219). The reader is repeatedly reminded that class is not merely a 'brute fact', but a process and, moreover, that new modes of consciousness are forged by shared experiences. As Vieta writes, '[a]t the same time that these experiments were resisting neo-liberalism [...] people also began to co-create community-based solutions that looked beyond the mediation of competitive markets, austerity, and cumbersome state or union bureaucracies' (p. 103).

Vieta points out that workers can develop a new consciousness of themselves as agents of change, and in relation with their surrounding communities, through a process of reclaiming their work and recuperating their own creative potential. The book is a welcome contribution to the – rather thin – empirical literature on workers' self-management. Hopefully, it will inspire more scholars to invest time and energy in the important task of understanding this phenomenon as our world becomes increasingly complex and labour increasingly socialized and interdependent.

A longer version of this review is available in the journal *Marx & Philosophy Book Reviews*.

Jerome Nikolai Warren 

*Institute of Cooperative Studies, University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany*

email: [gregorysamba@riseup.net](mailto:gregorysamba@riseup.net)

**ORCID**

Jerome Nikolai Warren  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1435-8519>