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Learning in Struggle: Argentina's New Worker Cooperatives as Transformative Learning Organizations

Apprendre par la lutte : les nouvelles coopératives de travailleurs en Argentine comme organisations d'apprentissage transformatrise

Aprendiendo en la lucha: las nuevas cooperativas de trabajado en argentina como organizaciones de aprendizaje transformador

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

This article considers Argentina's *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (worker-recuperated enterprises, or ERTs) as *transformative learning organizations*. ERTs are illustrative of how workers' conversions of capitalist firms into worker cooperatives—especially conversions emerging from troubled firms and in moments of deep socio-economic crises—transform workers (from managed employees to self-managed workers), work organizations (from capitalist businesses to labour-managed firms), and communities (from depleted to revitalized and self-provisioning localities).

Theoretically, the study is grounded in class-struggle, workplace learning, and social action learning approaches. These theoretical perspectives help the study work through how workplace conversions by workers, when converting troubled investor-owned or proprietary firms into worker coops, act as catalysts for contesting workplace exploitation and capitalist crises, while also beginning to move beyond them by forging new social relations of production and exchange. In the case of Argentina's ERTs, crises in the political economy and micro-economic crises at the point of production during the collapse of the neoliberal model at the turn of the millennium heightened workers' self-awareness of their situations of exploitation and motivated collective action. As a result, new worker cooperatives were created that also stimulated the social, cultural, and economic renewal of surrounding communities.

The study's research method relies on extended case studies of four diverse ERTs, which included ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews. Observations of daily workflows were conducted, as well as interviews and informal conversations with founding and newer ERT workers. In a more structured portion of the interview protocol, key-informants were asked to reflect on how they had personally changed after being involved in the ERT, and how production practices and involvement with the community had transformed in the process of conversion.

The article concludes by outlining how worker, organizational, and community transformations emerge from workers' processes of *informal learning* and *learning in struggle* as they collectively strive to overcome macro- and micro-economic crises and learn to become cooperators. This learning, the study shows, occurs in two ways: *intra-cooperatively* via informal workplace learning, and *inter-cooperatively* between workers from different ERTs and with surrounding communities. The self-management forged by ERTs thus embodies new, cooperative, and community-centered values and practices for these workers that, in turn, sketch out different possibilities for economic and productive life in Argentina.

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Learning in Struggle: Argentina's New Worker Cooperatives as Transformative Learning Organizations

Marcelo Vieta, PhD

This article delves into the nexus between workers' conversions of troubled firms in Argentina into worker cooperatives (*empreseas recuperadas por sus trabajadores*, or ERTs), the processes of learning new cooperative skills and values through struggle, and the subsequent transformations of communities. To do so, the study deploys research findings from workplace ethnographies and in-depth interviews at four ERT case studies. The article shows how transformations of employees to self-managed workers; troubled firms into worker cooperatives; and the social, cultural, and economic revitalization of communities catalyzed by ERTs are rooted simultaneously in *inter-cooperative* and *intra-cooperative* informal learning dynamics. A theoretical framework combining class-struggle analysis and workplace and social action learning approaches helps clarify how this informal "learning in struggle" ultimately makes ERTs *transformative learning organizations* for workers, organizations, and communities.

KEYWORDS: worker-recuperated enterprises, cooperation, workplace learning, social action learning, learning in struggle, business conversions, Argentina.

Introduction

One type of long-established work organization where workers' on-the-job learning, skills development, knowledge sharing, and collaborative work have historically stood out is the worker cooperative—democratically run businesses co-owned by workers and where labour is said to hire capital (Craig, 1993; Oakeshott, 1990; Smith *et al.*, 1988). Argentina's worker-recuperated enterprises (*empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores*, or ERTs) make up a group of contemporary worker coops that put into sharp relief workers' abilities to take up associated production, collectively learn new capacities and skills of self-management, and spearhead socio-economic change and community renewal.

ERTs are formerly investor- or privately-owned businesses that were in trouble or had declared bankruptcy and that are ultimately taken over by employees. They

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began to emerge in Argentina in the early1990s and surged during the social, political, and financial crisis years of 2001-2002 as more and more businesses began to fail and dismissed workers due, in part, to the collapse of its neoliberal system at the time. Rather than enter the growing mass of the unemployed and the poor, some workers took matters into their own hands by occupying and reconverting their failed places of employment into worker coops. ERTs, as I will show in the following pages, overcome micro-economic crises and precarious life conditions and help bring back security and dignity to workers' lives and to the communities that surround them.

This article explores the nexus between the emergence of ERTs, the mostly informal ways ERT workers learn the skills and values needed to self-manage their firms "through struggle," and the social transformations these new worker cooperatives foster. In what follows, I highlight key findings from a multi-dimensional research initiative I undertook in Argentina between 2005-2009. Via workplace ethnographies and in-depth interviews at four ERT case studies —forming one stream of a broader research project that includes historical and political economic analyses (Vieta, 2012, 2014)— I describe some of the changes in workers' subjectivities that unfold as they struggle collectively to overcome micro-economic crisis and learn cooperativism. In turn, these workers' transformations, I will show, catalyze broader organizational and social changes as ERT workers take on community-minded and socially aware values and practices beyond just the daily concerns of the shop. The transformations that unfold in these workers' subjectivities, from mostly acquiescent or self-interested employees to cooperative and self-managed workers, unfold, most crucially, via *informal learning processes* and in situations of *learning in struggle*.

As ERT workers characterize it, they become cooperators in the act of "doing" self-management. As one worker told me explicitly: "*Aprendimos cooperativismo … sobre la marcha*" ("We learned cooperativism … on the path of doing"). And in learning *sobre la marcha*, through struggle, and by having to overcome crises collectively, an ethic of the other gradually emerges with ERT workers. This is expressed as a deep-seated sense of solidarity with workmates and surrounding communities, communicated by ERT workers in a simple but evocative phrase that was repeated to me often: "*esto es de todos*" ("this belongs to all of us"). ERT protagonists call this solidarity acquired in struggle *compañerismo* (comradeship). Over time, *compañerismo* transforms into the community-focused values and horizontalized production and decision-making practices that infuse the new cooperative organization of the firm, consolidating and strengthening ERTs' cooperative labour processes and the social bonds between the ERT and local communities. Learning in struggle through the complex and trying processes of taking over and converting workplaces, I argue here, *transforms workers*,

organizations, and the multiple *communities* ERTs touch. Argentina's ERTs, then, provide a unique vantage point from which to compare how workers can—and do—transform workplaces and communities from hierarchical spaces of production and exchange to horizontally re-organized economic organizations.

I interpret these findings through the theoretical perspectives of class-struggle analysis and workplace and social action learning theory. Such an approach helps us see how crisis in the Argentine political economy and micro-economic crises at the point of production in troubled firms in Argentina heightened workers' self-awareness of their situations of exploitation and motivated collective action. At core, a theoretical framework combining class-struggle analysis and workplace and social action learning approaches helps us understand how the new skills and values needed for self-management are acquired through informal and experiential learning processes, and from within the very struggles that workers go through, showing ERTs to be *transformative learning organizations* for not only worker-members and their workplaces, but also for the communities within which these firms are situated.

The emergence of Argentina's ERTs

Political economic conjunctures

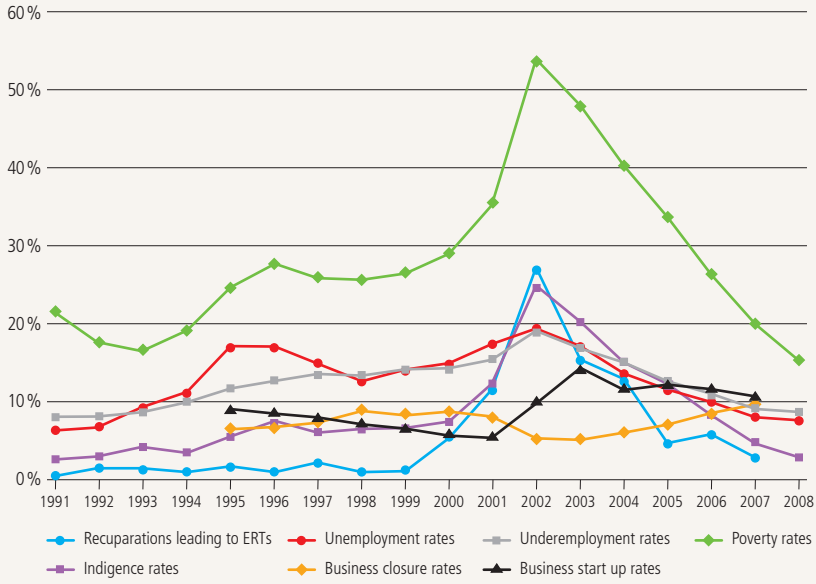
Today, around 10,000 workers self-manage their workplaces in 200 to 250 ERTs across Argentina (Palomino *et al.*, 2010; Ruggeri, 2010). They are present in most of the country's provinces and throughout its urban economy in sectors as diverse as printing and publishing, metallurgy, foodstuffs, construction, textiles, tourism, education, and health provisioning. Some ERTs have even emerged in heavier industries such as shipbuilding, meatpacking, chemicals, pulp and paper, and fuel and hydrocarbons (also see Fajn, 2003; Lavaca, 2004; Palomino *et al.*, 2010; Vuotto, 2012).

That ERTs have emerged within the past two decades as worker-led responses to the macro-economic crises of the neoliberal model in Argentina can be inferred from Figure 1, which situates the surge of ERTs with other major key socio-economic trends of the past two decades. Figure 1 clearly shows that the evolution of ERTs parallels the rising tide of unemployment, indigence, and business closure rates throughout the 1990s and early 2000s in Argentina. In particular, President Carlos Menem's regime's (1989-1999) IMF-sanctioned neoliberal policies of peso "convertability" to the US dollar; its selling off of most of Argentina's public assets; the multinationalization of the economy; draconian labour law reforms consolidated further by Menem's successor, Fernando de la Rúa (1999-2001); and the massive trade deficit and rates of underemployment, unemployment, and poverty that subsequently resulted, all

served to greatly compromise Argentina's macro-economic reality, organized labour's earlier victories dating back to the first two Peronist presidencies (1946-1955), and the competitive advantage of many of the country's small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Atzeni and Vieta, 2014; Gambina and Campione, 2002; Olmedo and Murray, 2002; Palomino, 2003, 2005; Patroni, 2004). Tellingly, for example, Figure 1 also shows that the period between 1998-2002 was consistently marked by more business closures and bankruptcies than start-ups, ominously presaging the final implosion of the neoliberal model that was felt with force across all of Argentina's economic and social sectors between late 2001 and mid 2003. Figure 1's parallel trends in business closures, unemployment, poverty, and indigence further suggest that this socio-economic collapse was most strongly felt by the country's workers and the marginalized. It is no coincidence, then, that these years also saw the greatest surge of ERTs.

FIGURE 1

ERT recuperations compared to key socioeconomic indicators in Argentina, 1991-2008



Sources: INDEC (2011), Ministerio de Trabajo (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2010) World Bank (2011).

Workers' motivations for workplace takeovers

Variously driven by owner or investor despair; by nefarious business dealings by managers who took advantage of lax labour laws, corrupted legal institutions, indifferent unions, and pro-business policies; or by simple managerial or owner ineptitude, the socio-economic crises of the neoliberal years in Argentina inevitably led to amplified rates of exploitation and the mistreatment of workers

at more and more firms across the country (Ruggeri *et al.*, 2005; Palomino, 2003; Patroni, 2004). ERT protagonists consistently mention five overlapping micro-economic and micro-political experiences that most immediately motivated their workplace takeovers: owners' illegal *vaciamiento* (literally, "emptying" or asset stripping) of firms' machines and inventories just before or shortly after bankruptcy is declared, often in collusion with corrupt local officials and court trustees; employees' perceived imminence of the bankruptcy or closure of their firms; not getting paid salaries, wages, and benefits for weeks or months; actual layoffs and firings; and lockout and other forms of maltreatment (Ruggeri *et al.*, 2005: 66).

Bottom-up and spontaneous workers' resistances would ultimately emerge in more and more firms across Argentina as the rising exploitation they experienced on shop floors became increasingly unbearable to workers, as labour contracts were explicitly violated by employers, and as the political economic system that had delivered workplace security and social benefits in the past slowly corroded around them (Atzeni, 2010). In addition, most unions, on the whole, were unresponsive or even hostile to the plight of ERT workers (Clarke and Antivero, 2009). Many of the country's major unions, as well as its union central the CGT, had been co-opted into Menem's neoliberal program (Olmedo and Murray, 2002; Palomino, 2005). This was coupled by the short-sightedness of Argentine organized labour as it failed to see, in the main, its role in these new worker coops without bosses (Fajn, 2003; Rebón, 2007). But, most practically, traditional union tactics proved toothless in these socio-economic circumstances. Slow-downs and soldiering, or putting down tools or striking, are useful methods of protest for demanding better work conditions or wage increases during more stable economic times. These options are less effective during severe economic downturns or crises (Hyman, 1975, 1989; Kelly, 1998). The latter was predominantly the case in Argentina in the years spanning the turn of the millennium, when firms were closing throughout the economy, micro-economic hardship was rampant, and the unemployment rate high (Atzeni, 2010; Atzeni and Vieta, 2014). During these moments of capitalist crises, employers can and often do, with increased impunity, engage in systematic lockouts, asset theft, and other blatant infringements of the standard employment contract. But it is also during these moments that the exploitation, already always present within the capitalist labour process, is made visible to workers as egregious violations of the wage-labour contract, as work intensifies, salaries fall, and redundancies increase. In turn-of-millennium Argentina, at a time when the so-called "class compromise" between workers, employers, and the state ruptured, the solution for more and more workers was to partake of spontaneous acts of workplace occupations, relying on the solidarity that workers had already been forging over the years on shop floors, and that had been solidifying during the period of acute economic crisis (Rebón, 2007; Ruggeri, 2006).

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

Class struggle and crisis

In order to unpack how workers' consent on shop floors ruptured in some workplaces in Argentina during this period, and the social outcomes of the new values and practices of self-management that were taken up in firms that became ERTs, I first rely on a class-struggle theoretical approach (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Lebowitz, 2003). A class-struggle approach considers how workers' subjectivities transform in praxis as they struggle within and against the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system of production (Lebowitz, 2003, 2008). Considering the collective identity of workers as a *class in the making* (Thompson, 1963, 2001), this approach understands class as rooted in a complex historical materialist dynamic whereby people are made by *and also* make history (Marx, 2002). We are made, in other words, by a combination of our historical and material situations *and* our acts and our doings and, in turn, can remake our circumstances in the process. ERT protagonists, too, I contend in this study, are showing how, as Thompson (2001) put it, "class happens" (*ibid.*: 3). ERTs, I hold, are manifestations of how the working class can immanently (re)make itself, by its workers' own agency and in their own name, as they "live [out] their own history" (*ibid.*: 5) and struggle together for control of their working lives. Indeed, ERTs are one instantiation of a long history of workers' self-activity (Vieta, 2014).

Moreover, a class-struggle approach views moments of *rupture* and *crisis* within the predominant socio-economic system as potential openings for moving beyond the prevailing reality of exploitation (Wright, 2009). For Marcuse (1969), social changes spawned by political and economic crises *and* the very actions of groups struggling against power from above showed how transformation could begin by spontaneous, inventive, and non-vanguardist forms of political expression "from below" (*ibid.*: 87). And for him, the "translation of the economic into the radical political struggle" could be its "consequence". *Crises*, then, are both threatening moments of dis-organization for capitalism's socio-economic order, and potential moments for re-organization for alternatives to this status quo. The potential for bottom-up revolt can immanently emerge from out of the system's inherent cracks and crises, as moments of economic and political tensions translate or put into relief for the oppressed their oppressions and the similitude of others' oppressions (*ibid.*: 83). As autonomist Marxists Bell and Cleaver (2002) write, in unintended synchrony with Marcuse, "crisis is, from the point of view of the working-class subject, a moment not of break*down* but of break*through*..." (*ibid.*: 58-59, emphasis theirs). Crises and the events they spawn are, in short, openings for the class struggle.

Argentina's ERTs show us how class struggle played out with some workers, praxically driven by the crises and needs confronting them, and spontaneously unfolding within commonly shared life experiences. And what were the commonly lived experiences of macro- and micro-economic crises that piqued in Argentina during the implosion of the neoliberal model in recent years, and that brought together some workers through their direct actions of occupying and self-managing firms? Intensification of exploitation and dwindling salaries and benefits. Shared feelings of frustration as thousands of firms were closing and declaring bankruptcy or were idle. Commonly felt fear at being relegated to the growing ranks of the unemployed and the poor. Feelings of helplessness and the loss of dignity as job security eroded. And countless stories of domestic crises and the breakdown of families as a result of increased life precarization.

Informal, social action, and workplace learning "in struggle"

Social movement learning theorists and workplace learning researchers invested in class analysis have taken up exploring and theorizing the informal and collaborative learning processes that unfold in social struggles. Combining the Owenite and Deweyian belief in the transformative force of experiential "learning by doing" with a class-struggle approach, social movement and workplace learning theory is relevant for this study for understanding how workers' informal learning "in struggle" can unfold in crisis-riddled workplaces and their conversions to worker coops.

There has been a growing interest in the forms of learning within social movements in recent years (e.g., Foley, 1999; Gouin, 2009; Hall and Clover, 2005; Hall *et al.*, 2012; Overwein, 2000). Foley (1999) has specifically merged social movement learning theory with class-struggle approaches. Via several case studies, Foley details the ways that social movement participants primarily learn collaboratively and in social action when engaging "in emancipatory struggle" (*ibid.*: 11). Analyzing the interconnections between political economy, micro-politics, social struggles, discursive practices, and learning, Foley contends that the process of learning in social movements is a "contested activit[y]" within their organizations and in the social sphere that is being struggled over. Learning in social movements, for Foley, occurs in the very struggles over power and meaning, both bringing to light relations of domination in society and in the very social issues that are being struggled over. In turn, this learning assists protagonists in working through how emancipation from oppressive social relations can unfold and proliferate. Hence, learning new values and attitudes of social justice emerge immanently, for Foley, in the very social actions of movement protagonists (*ibid.*: 131-143).

From the perspective of radical adult education and participatory democracy, Schugurensky (2000) summarizes the three types of learning that take place in

social movements and alternative organizations: formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Unlike formal learning in institutional settings, or non-formal learning via personal and planned learning initiatives or work-based programs, *informal learning* is the more expansive learning that occurs in everyday life. Informal learning, according to Schugurensky, takes in all forms of social learning occurring outside formal or non-formal curricula or educational institutions. Moreover, the learner is often not aware that she is learning but rather engages in what education theorists have called "tacit" or "incidental" learning (Garrick, 1996; Larrabure *et al.*, 2011; Marsick and Watkins, 1997). Garrick (1996), in particular, emphasizes how informal learning is especially tangible in the everyday experiences of the workplace in practices such as networking and teamwork, mentoring, and learning by trial and error.

The work of Livingstone and Roth (2001) has particular significance for this study, underscoring the informal and tacit modes of learning and knowledge sharing already always present in workplaces. Combining an impressive gathering of quantitative analysis in Canadian workplaces with qualitative data from their own interviews at Canadian auto manufacturing plants in the 1990s, Livingstone and Roth conclude that there is ample evidence to show that "a massive amount of informal learning [takes place] among working people," both on shop floors and in the portion of their lives not spent working for wages (*ibid.*:1). Livingstone and Scholtz (2007), and Smith and Dobson (2010), have gone on to convincingly document and analyze the rich informal and self-motivated learning cultures of working-class people, also showing how knowledge sharing unfolds in workplaces often as forms of resistance against managerial control and business re-rationalization programs.

Centering specifically on the informal learning saturating democratic participation within worker cooperatives, the work of Quarter and Midha (2001) is also particularly relevant to this study. Paralleling my research strategy, Quarter and Midha engaged in ethnographic and interview research in a case study of a Toronto-based worker cooperative grocery store, showing how members learn about their tasks and expand their cooperative work capacities mostly informally, through day-to-day work experiences, shop floor discussions, and questions to internal experts and other coop members. Their work further highlights that the actual open and democratic structure of a worker coop is a crucial factor in promoting informal and experientially-based knowledge sharing. Others have called this the cooperative movement's particular propensity for fostering *associated* forms of learning.

Indeed, as the emerging literature on cooperative organizational forms shows, coops are intrinsically learning organizations (i.e., Borzaga and Depdri, 2009; Jensen, 2011; Laidlaw, 1962; Larrabure *et al.*, 2011; MacPherson, 2002; Schoening, 2006;

Webb and Cheney, 2014). The principles, values, and practices of cooperatives (ICA, 2013) illustrate in clear lines what Keen (1912) and MacPherson (2002) have termed a coop's inherent "associative intelligence." For MacPherson, this is:

> a belief that there is a special kind of knowing that emerges when people work together effectively; a conviction that people through working together could learn skills that would make collective behaviour more economically rewarding, socially beneficial and personally satisfying. (MacPherson, 2002: 90)

Cooperatives, then, are learning organizations at their core. First, coops are inherently social businesses (Quarter *et al.*, 2012). They emerge from members having to understand, mutually discover, and learn about the myriad needs and capacities of fellow members, as well as of other stakeholders, such as customers and surrounding communities (Leadbeater, 1997; Novkovic, 2008; Quarter and Midha, 2001; Quarter *et al.*, 2009). Second, their democratic governance structures also compel cooperatives to be closely attuned to members' needs and skills in order to ensure the long-term viability of their business (Gates, 1999; Sauser, 2008). These factors are perhaps even more marked with worker coops, where membership is tied specifically to work and members need to be deeply invested in the well-being of fellow members in order to secure the future stability of their business (Becchetti *et al.*, 2010; Pérotin, 2012). As Laidlaw (1962) has argued:

> Such concepts as group responsibility, reaching decisions by majority vote, delegating authority to responsible officers, observing rules agreed upon by the group, exerting self-discipline for the welfare of the group, cannot be taught or learned in the abstract. They must become part of the personality of the individual and the experience of the group through actual situations. For the great majority of people, the co-operative society engaged in the day-to-day requirements of life and earning a living becomes the ideal vehicle through with these concepts are acquired. (*ibid.*: 10-11)

Worker-recuperated firms as sites of transformative learning

The scant but suggestive research to date on learning processes at worker-recuperated enterprises alludes to how these firms seem to be inherently transformative learning organizations. This is essentially the case, according to this literature, because conversions of businesses by workers are paradigm shifting for them.

McCain (1999:165), for instance, has argued that the "mystery of worker buyouts" lies in the "learning by doing" that unfolds as workers must learn to take control of their own human capital or risk failure and the permanent loss of jobs. Jensen (2011), specifically relevant to the "learning by doing" that I will discuss in the next section, hearkens back to McCain when he writes that "the mystery of the presence of [labour-managed firms] is explained by the learning-by-doing process," where "collective learning" helps override the risks of a

new project of self-management for workers (*ibid.*:76). Delahaye (2005) specifically underscores the emancipatory potential of informal learning in worker-recuperated firms, as new skills and values unfold organically in these firms when workers must struggle through a "traumatic and uncertain environment where the disorienting dilemma of bankruptcy…[challenges]…all former belief systems and values underpinning the older firm and its workers" (*ibid.*: 45-48). Similarly, in an earlier study of workers' takeovers of businesses, Paton (1989) argued how "[e]ach takeover is *an intense learning process* for the workforce as an organization as well as for individuals—there is a change of social roles, new attitudes are required" (*ibid.*: 48, emphasis added).

Much of the learning that takes place within worker-recuperated firms is, in short, intensive and informal. It takes shape within emergent processes of collaborative learning by doing and in struggle, or, as ERT protagonists characterize it, *sobre la marcha*. This learning is also transformative for workers. While the early findings of the literature on labour-managed firms (LMFs) are suggestive of the transformative nature of learning at ERTs, Jensen (2011) rightly points out that the specifics of this learning by doing at worker-recuperated firms are not understood well. "The dynamics of the learning process of [these firms]," he concludes, "is an area virtually untouched in the literature of the LMF" (*ibid.*: 75). This considered, it is an additional goal of this article to contribute to the LMF literature's understanding of the learning processes of workers at converted workplaces.

Research Method

The research I report on in this article deployed an extended case study approach (Burawoy, 1998) of four ERTs: *Artes Gráficas Chilavert*, a small and emblematic print shop in an economically challenged Buenos Aires neighbourhood; *Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores* (UST), a 90-plus member waste recycling, construction, and parks maintenance cooperative in the southern Buenos Aires working class suburb of Avellaneda; *Comercio y Justicia*, a newspaper in the industrial city of Córdoba; and *Salud Junín*, a formerly private medical clinic recuperated by its mostly female nurses and maintenance staff, also in the city of Córdoba. I engaged in multiple visits to these ERTs between 2005-2009, which included ethnographic observations together with semi-structured and in-depth interviews of 30 ERT protagonists in these firms. Interviews delved into personal changes in workers' attitudes, values, and practices, as well as reflecting on the structural changes in their firms before and since recuperation. Selected through a criteria "diversification" based on economic activity, size, and location (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007), my extended case studies had me visit each ERT for several weeks at a time, both engaging in interviews and informal conversations and observing daily workflows.[1]

In a more structured portion of the interviews I probed for key informants' own perceptions of how they had personally changed after being involved in the ERT and how they acquired new job skills and learned cooperative values over the time that they had been at the ERT. As I previously mentioned, given that informal learning processes often go unnoticed by participants, they need to be drawn out or elicited (Larrabure *et al.*, 2011). Here, I thus adopted a set of learning or knowledge acquisition indicators inspired by Schugurensky's work with participatory budgeting participants in Porto Alegre, Brazil and Rosario, Argentina (Schugurensky, 2001; Pinnington and Schugurensky, 2010; Lerner and Schugurensky, 2007). As Schugurensky and his co-researchers did with key informants in Brazil and Argentina, these learning indicators helped stimulate my study's key informants' personal reflections of their own experiences at the ERT, drawing out the unnoticed learning dimensions of these experiences. This instrument, embedded within the broader interview protocol, concerned key informant's changes in *knowledge*, *skills*, *attitudes and values*, and *practices* in six key areas: 1- their democratic and cooperative practices at the ERT; 2- personal behaviours towards others at the ERT and outside of the ERT; 3- abilities to influence political decisions both at and outside of the ERT; 4- concern and interest in community affairs outside of the ERT; 5- how connected to the community they felt; 6- and how their actual participation in community affairs within and outside of the ERT had changed since being part of the cooperative.

ERTs and Social Transformation

Informal learning and the transformation of subjectivities

Most broadly, key informants self-reported that since working at the ERT they have experienced some degree of positive transformation in their connections to the community, in their practices of community participation within and outside of the ERT, and in their actual collective decision-making skills within the cooperative. Perhaps most dramatically, a founding member of the print shop Chilavert reflected on his transformative experiences this way:

> Early on in the struggle to reclaim our work we started fighting for our salaries, for getting out of our severe debt loads that the boss had left us. Now, looking back on our struggle, I can see where the change in me started, because it begins during your struggles…. And then, suddenly, you see that you've formed a cooperative and you start getting involved in the struggle of the community.

And another ERT worker from Chilavert related his transformation in subjectivity specifically to the change in his community and political values and attitudes and his learning in struggle: "The experiences here have been great because they have taught me many things. They have taught me to value my neighbours, to

learn from struggle, and they teach us [that our project with our cooperative] also makes politics."

The learning processes guiding these transformations of subjectivities at Argentina's ERTs tend to occur *informally*. This informal learning occurs most noticeably *intra-cooperatively* and intersubjectively via the social bonds that form organically on shop floors. First, this intra-cooperative learning emerges from having to struggle together to overcome crises at the point of production; enduring the days, weeks, and months of occupying the firm and resisting eviction threats; and from having to collectively learn how to self-manage a firm. Second, as with Quarter and Midha's (2001) findings with the worker coop they studied (see above), informal learning at ERTs is also linked to the attitudinal and behavioral examples of its leader(s). In the case of Argentina, ERT leaders often (but not always) have had some experience with political or union organizing before becoming involved in the ERT and thus often bring with them and transmit to other workers values and behaviours of solidarity and community concern (Vieta, 2012). In the main, the intra-cooperative learning that occurs in struggle and from the example of leaders or more experienced ERT members unfolds in the everyday processes of working at the coop. One of the new, non-founding *socios* (members) I talked to at UST expressed this intra-cooperative informal learning thusly: "I formed into a *cooperativista* from inside, from here, in the process of working here." Another worker from Salud Junín stated it to me simply: "*Aprendimos cooperativismo…sobre la marcha*" ("We learned cooperativism…on the path of doing"). Similarly, a founding member of UST emphasized the collective and immanent nature of how they learn and adopt cooperative values when he stated that: "We learn together as we do things… our commitments are expressed in our everyday practices."

Informal learning also takes place *inter-cooperatively*, via the solidarity networks that form between ERTs and between ERTs and myriad community groups. Often, this inter-cooperative learning is also mediated through the ERT phenomenon's umbrella organizations, such as the *Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas* (National Movement of Recuperated Enterprises, or MNER), the *Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores* (National Movement of Worker-Recuperated Factories), the *Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Autogestionados* (National Association of Self-Managed Workers, or ANTA), and the *Confederación Nacional de Cooperativas de Trabajo* (National Confederation of Worker Cooperatives, or CNCT), among others.[2] Inter-cooperative social bonds rooted in experience and knowledge sharing emerge usually during an ERT's first days, weeks, and months, which is the period of highest political conflict and economic direness for its workers. During these moments, when workers are planning or carrying out the occupation and takeover of their

firms, ERT umbrella organizations, other ERTs, and various social justice groups come to support workers occupying a plant, offering solidarity and sharing with them how to go about taking over a firm and subsequently self-managing it. At times, even impromptu teach-ins are held with the occupying workers. Salud Junin's former president again provides us with a cogent statement regarding this inter-cooperative, network-based informal learning:

> Meanwhile, what continued to strengthen the processes was the unity and solidarity of other sectors helping out: students, sympathetic unions, neighbourhood groups, human rights organizations…. That's what permitted all of these processes to sustain themselves over time…. [Since then,] we've had close relations with other ERTs and we have participated in national gatherings of ERTs, as well…. There [continues to be] a permanent exchange between…us.

This intra- and inter-cooperative learning *sobre la marcha*, by actually "doing" self-management, emerges and solidifies over time and collectively within the recuperated workplace in what ERT workers themselves call *compeñerismo* (comradeship).[3] *Compañerismo* is rooted in the paradigm-shifting nature of takeovers and business conversions for workers suggested in the business conversion and LMF literature (see above). It is driven by the experiences of workers who have lived through and shared situations of hardship, as workmates strive to overcome crises collectively and reopen the firm under their own control. *Compañerismo* is also strengthened during a process that actually begins before the takeovers, when workers start to realize that their own plight is a microcosm of the hardships endured by other workers in other workplaces (Vieta, 2012, 2014). Practically, what the value of *compeñerismo* means for ERT workers is that they are now much more likely to help out their workmates in situations when, in the past, they would have stuck to their own tasks and individual interests. As well, workers gradually learn to take a deeper and more committed interest in the wellbeing of the enterprise and the community from the social bonds that emerge in collective social action. This is linked to what the broader LMF literature has found to be participants' "intrinsic motivators" of job satisfaction and community concern that extends workers' outlook towards their jobs beyond values of self-interest and task efficiency encouraged in capitalist firms (Becchetti *et al.*, 2013; Borzaga and Depedri, 2009). There is a more expansive social framework, or "normative expectations," of solidarity that worker coop members often experience when compared to workers at employer-managed firms (Sugden, 1998). Some researchers call this "we-rationality" (Navarra, 2009: 18), a set of social norms and practices guiding cooperative behaviour that develops amongst associates working together and co-owning a firm (also see Bruni and Zamagni, 2004).

At Argentina's ERTs, it was clear in my many site visits over the years that the new social bonds that emerge from the paradigm-shifting experiences of micro-

economic crises, workplace takeovers and conversions, and having to learn to self-manage a firm together, attenuate workers' commitments to the plight of co-workers and the community. Shared experiences of struggle and the difficulties of starting a new self-managed project ground ERT members' *compañerismo* in a deep ethic of the other—the "*esto es de todos*" ethic I first mentioned in this articles' introduction. As a nurse from Salud Junín underscored, shared experiences of struggling to occupy the clinic and restart production as a coop served to bring the workers' collective together and created a deep sense of solidarity between colleagues: "It was a very precarious time for us all and this also served to bring us together as a group, to look out for each other." Another founding member of Salud Junín further highlighted this struggle-*compañerismo* connection:

> I believe that what one incorporates from a past of social and political activism and shared struggles are values and methodologies of working together, democratic participation, and so on. Most importantly, I think, is that one incorporates…a sense of ethics, *una lucha por el otro* (a struggle for the other).

And as a founding member of Chilavert described it, the ethic of responsibility for the other emerges in the very change from owner-management to worker-management, and from being mere workmates to becoming *socios* (associates) of the cooperative:

> Before, under owner-management, there was always someone marking out the rhythm of your work. You would work because you got paid. Things are now different. Now, we have other obligations based on our own responsibility to one another…. Before we were workmates but today we aren't workmates anymore. We're now *socios* (associates).

It must be pointed out that worker transformations recognizing their "obligations" and "responsibility" to each other are not a given for all ERT workers, nor are they present to the same degree in all ERTs. Indeed, as with any collective experience, not all participants are affected or transformed in the same way by shared struggles. As Eduardo Murúa (2006), former president of MNER, explains:

> The change in subjectivity in some workers is…more powerful than in others. The subjectivity and culture of some workers have not changed. Some workers go to work every day and just do their tasks in the recuperated enterprise; they do them very well, perhaps with more effort than before when they worked under a boss. But they finish their job for the day and then they go home like they did in their old jobs. Other workers are different. They have reconceptualized the factory differently. They begin to talk and think in a new way. They have come to understand how their former bosses were exploiting them. They have come to understand how the economic system functions in Argentina, how the capitalist system destroys each one of our workplaces….

Supported by Ruggeri *et al.* (2005) and Craig (1993) concerning the emergence of cooperatives from out of socio-economic difficulties and the deep commitment of founders to the coop, the greatest changes in subjectivity, as Murúa further underscores, takes place with those founding members that actually experienced the challenges of taking over their places of work: "The strongest change in subjectivity occurs in those workers that entrenched themselves the most in the issues of the recuperation of the enterprise and that struggled to turn them into cooperatives, especially during the early days of occupation." Indeed, with the workers I interviewed, deeper degrees of transformation in the subjectivities of individual ERT workers did tend to be based on their participation in the occupation and conversion of the firm. Moreover, the degree of take up of an ethic of the other was linked, on the whole, to the lived intensity of past conflicts.

But it was also clear from my interviews that tensions continue to exist between commitments to cooperativism and *compañerismo* and the continued individualism or indifference of some members. Indeed, these tensions often exist within the same worker. At times, some workers have said to me things such as: "I didn't sign up for self-managing my workplace," or "All I ever wanted was to do an honest day's work and get my regular pay cheque." It was also obvious that some of the workers I interviewed were more aware of these tensions within themselves than others as they critically reflected on their own contradictions between the desire to self-manage their work and their longing at times for "simpler" days when they would only need to "keep their heads down," work their shift, and go home. Generally, however, most workers I talked to and formally interviewed at ERTs over the years self-reported to have experienced at least some degree of positive change in their commitments to each other as they engage in a common project of *autogestión* (self-management) together.

Compañerismo is also seen in how ERT workers informally learn or expand their work skills and how they acquire the values of cooperativism. In the everyday activity of the firm, new ERT workers are also informally trained, both in values of cooperativism and in job-specific skills, on the job via apprenticing. Tellingly, connecting ERTs to their working-class roots emulates the principal way that job training has traditionally taken place in blue-collar economic sectors in Argentina and elsewhere (Munck *et al.*, 1985). And in ERTs too, practices of apprenticing are tightly and purposefully interwoven right into their new labour processes.[4] Indeed, shadowing a more senior *socio* for a period of time on the job or on actual shop floors, I observed time and again, is a key way that ERT workers tend to learn new job tasks, skills, and cooperative values. "I started as an apprentice here [twenty years ago]," a founding member of UST related to me:

> And I wanted to learn how to use the machines here and the old guys taught me as jobs came up. They would take breaks during peak hours and let me use the machines while they supervised…. And I do the same with my apprentice now…. Just like the old guys gave me a chance, I've also been teaching many of the young guys here and giving them a chance.

On the whole, ERT *socios* tend to learn not only job skills through the mentor-apprentice model, but the model also serves to relay new values and practices of cooperativism (again informally) to newer and younger workers. In short, at ERTs, workers tend to learn informally from each other—again, intra-cooperatively—on shop floors and on a trial-and-error basis as they work out the daily practicalities of self-management together.

The transformation of workplaces

The impacts of informal learning and *compañerismo* are also noticeable in an ERT's new cooperative labour processes. For instance, they are visibly reflected in how the second cooperative principle—"democratic member control" (ICA, 2013)—is adopted and practiced. At ERTs, informal communication flows between workers are mediated by both consensus-based decision-making and looser and more informal communication structures when compared to the old firm. According to various workers I interviewed, this is in sharp contrast to the way work processes were conducted in the more hierarchical work structures of the previous capitalist enterprise. Grounding this transformation of labour processes, it was clear during my time at these firms, were the strong and informal social bonds that exist between workers, serving to horizontalize the workplace from the bottom-up. When visiting an ERT for the first time, this is most immediately witnessed in simple social practices such as workers eating together on a daily basis, sipping *mate* together and with visitors at break stations throughout the firm, and often talking about their stories of workplace recuperation and collective struggles. Indeed, one has a palpable sense of a more relaxed work environment than one would otherwise experience at firms with managerial supervision.

Actual task-oriented labour processes have also been horizontalized by *compañerismo*. Administrative and supervisory tasks in ERTs tend to be handled by regularly elected (and recallable) workers' councils from the coop membership (rather than by hired professional managers, as in some worker coops), and on a daily basis by more informal sub-groups of workers that form on shop floors depending on specific production needs or job tasks. Moreover, regular workers' assemblies are held (sometimes weekly, but usually monthly or when major issues arise) to debate and discuss issues that affect all members of the cooperative.

Another way one can assess the degree to which *compañerismo* has impacted an ERT is to look at how salaries are handled (Fajn, 2003; Rebón, 2007; Ruggeri

et al., 2005). Survey research carried out by two different teams from the University of Buenos Aires found that between 56% (Ruggeri *et al.*, 2005: 67) and 71% (Fajn, 2003: 161) of ERTs practice complete pay equity. Ruggeri *et al.* (2005), in particular, discovered noteworthy nuances to the likelihood of pay equity at an ERT linked to, among other things, its *age*, *size*, and the *degree of conflictivity* faced by the workers' collective when founding the worker coop (also see Vieta, 2010, 2012).

First, older ERTs, especially those recuperated during the more turbulent years of socio-economic crisis in Argentina between 2001-2003 (see Figure 1), are more likely to practice pay equity when compared to more recently recuperated firms. For example, 71% of ERTs recuperated during or before 2001—the most turbulent years of Argentina's neoliberal implosion and national debt default—were still practicing complete pay equity in 2005, while only 39% of those recovered during 2003-2004 were doing so in 2005 (Ruggeri *et al.*, 2005: 80). Second, the size of the firm tends to also be linked to pay equity: 64% of firms with 20 workers or less practice pay equity, compared to 47% of firms having between 20-50 workers and 54% of firms with more than 50 workers (*ibid.*: 81). Third, pay parity is specifically linked to an ERT's level of conflict suffered by its protagonists before, during, and after converting the firm into a worker coop. For instance, 71% of ERTs that were involved in lengthy acts of occupation or other intense conflicts in their early days subsequently practice pay equity, while only 37% of ERTs that were not occupied or had not experienced intense conflicts do so (*ibid.*: 80). Some workers at ERTs that incorporate equitable pay schemes told me that their desire to practice pay equity was an ethical and political decision for them because it was one specific way of counterbalancing the most exploitative practices experienced under former bosses. Probing these workers further, it was evident that these equitable remuneration practices are deeply rooted in the solidarity forged during the most intense moments of crisis at the firm.

The links between egalitarian pay practices and an ERT's size, age, and its intensity of previous conflicts were evident in my four case studies. Chilavert and Salud Junín, both with highly conflictual beginnings and the two smallest ERTs of my four cases, practice complete pay equity amongst full members. UST, a newer ERT compared to the other four (founded in 2004), practices almost complete pay equity, differentiating some salaries with respect to seniority, overtime, and, interestingly, whether or not workers participate in political work in the name of the coop outside of work hours. Conversely, the newspaper *Comercio y Justicia*, also with a relatively large membership base, had the least conflictual beginning of my four cases (having been bought out by workers rather than occupied) and has the most differentiated salary scheme based on experience, seniority, and position, continuing to a certain extent the same hierarchical structure of the previous investor-owned iteration of the newspaper.

In addition to Ruggeri *et al.*'s positive correlations between the size, age, and level of conflictivity and the egalitarian pay programs of an ERT, one further observation deserves mention. This relates to the view, held by some Marxist critiques of self-management, that cooperatives that must compete within free markets have their democratic potential compromised by the constant need to reduce costs and maximize revenues. This will tend to push coops to become more and more hierarchical in structure as they strive to stay competitive (Lebowitz, 2003; Marx, 1981; McNally, 1993). The newspaper ERT, *Comercio y Justicia*, seems to illustrate this tension between cooperative values and practices and market needs. *Comercio y Justicia* is involved in the most competitive market of the four ERTs I worked with, which is dominated by Argentina's largest media and newspaper conglomerate, Grupo Clarín. Paralleling similar theses put forward by Atzeni and Ghigliani (2007) and Fajn and Rebón (2005) with regards to ERTs and continued competitive markets, *Comercio y Justicia's* highly competitive market seems to have encouraged this ERT to continue to organize itself within a hierarchical production process, emulating the divisions of labour of investor-owned newspapers. For example, each of the newspaper's sectors is headed by an appointed *encargado*, or chief, that is, a "chief correspondent," "editor in chief," "chief of publication," etc. And, again, salaries were also the most differentiated of my four case studies at this ERT. Not surprisingly, it was also evident in my visits to *Comercio y Justicia* that it tends to mostly focus on the task of producing a newspaper rather than further consolidating and horizontalizing its cooperative model or becoming more involved in the community or with other social movements. Moreover, with this ERT, attendance at workers' assemblies is not mandatory as they are in the other three cases. Not coincidently, then, ERT members I interviewed at *Comercio y Justicia* also tended to have the weakest personal changes in community-focused values and attitudes.

In the main, and despite some of the continued tensions that exist between cooperative values and market pressures at ERTs, my empirical findings strongly suggest that an intersubjectively existential process and inter- and intra-cooperative informal learning structure develops from out of shared struggles, and that this process of "learning through struggle" helps consolidate the worker collective and fosters horizontalized labour processes. This process of learning in struggle, in short, is encapsulated in the ways ERT protagonists reorganize their firms' labour processes and remuneration schemes. Moreover, this learning in struggle undergirds their workers' value of *compañerismo*. While it is true that not all ERTs practice completely egalitarian salary schemes and flat organizational models, it is nevertheless also clear that the strong tendency amongst all ERTs is to practice far more egalitarian forms of remuneration and more horizontal work structures than when these firms were under the control of bosses and owners. Thus, with

ERTs, commonly lived experiences, overcoming crises together, and collaborative work practices learned together through struggle—not particular skill-sets or hierarchical divisions of labour—underscore the cooperative transformations of labour processes and these firms' new social relations of production.

The transformation of communities

Bringing the community into the firm

Like other social economy businesses, ERTs tend to eventually take on strong social objectives (Vieta *et al.*, 2012). But hosting cultural and community spaces and involving themselves intimately with the needs of local communities are not strategies of corporate social responsibility for ERTs. Instead, ERT workers that host community projects tend to see their workspaces as continuations of and integral players in the neighbourhoods where they are located. And again, they acquire these community outlooks informally, from out of their ethics and practices of *compañerismo*, and over time as workers traverse rich experiences of solidarity and overcoming difficulties together between workmates and with the community at large.

ERTs' new forms of socialized production extend the everyday business interests of the firm to include provisioning for the social, cultural, and economic needs of surrounding communities. For instance, the print shop Chilavert hosts the ERT Documentation Centre, run by activist researchers and student volunteers associated with the University of Buenos Aires and used frequently by national and international researchers. A vibrant community centre called *Chilavert Recupera* (Chilavert Recuperates) also operates in the shop, hosting plays, art classes, music concerts, and community events. Furthermore, Chilavert houses an adult high school equivalency program focused on a popular education curriculum that is heavily used by local marginalized communities. Another emblematic ERT, IMPA, a large metallurgic shop on the border of the Caballito and Almagro neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires, is also known as *La Fábrica Cultural* (The Cultural Factory) because it dedicates a large portion of its space to an art school, silk-screen shop, free health clinic, community theatre, and an adult education high school program. Artes Gráficas Patricios, in the southern Buenos Aires neighbourhood of Barracas, also hosts a popular education school, plus a community radio station and a dental and medical clinic, all run by workers, neighbours, social movement groups, and health practitioners volunteering their time.

All of this is, again, a marked difference from the closed shop and possessive individualism that tends to mark the proprietary shop owned by shareholders or managed by bosses. For many workers, the acquisition of stronger community values and the opening up of their firms to community projects is a direct result

of their struggles to convert the firm and consolidate the ERT. Moreover, there is a tangible sense in the conversations one has with ERT workers of the importance, in their minds, of their community projects for a different, less individualistic and more communitarian kind of social and economic project for Argentina. As a member of Salud Junín related to me:

> No, I was never involved in a community project of any sort before helping to start this coop…. [Now] I'd like to do more work in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, for example, or some such thing. But time is limited! For us, it's about doing as much as we can for the community from here, our coop.

It is important to reiterate here that, save for five of the workers I interviewed that had union or social activist backgrounds, none of my key informants had previous experiences with community organizing or activism. It was the specific involvement with the ERT project, the overcoming of challenges together, their new self-managed associations with workmates, and the help they received from community groups and other ERTs during the coop's initial days that fundamentally began to transform these workers into more community-minded individuals, and their workplaces into transformative community organizations.

Taking the firm into the community

My interview data also suggest that, after having worked at the ERT, some workers also experience a strong desire to personally take up community practices beyond the ERT. As a novice 21 year old member of UST discussed with me: "I never worried about community problems or problems in my neighbourhood before coming to work here. I just couldn't see them before, in reality. Now, from here, you start to see these problems and you start to work [to alleviate them]". ERT protagonists' desires to engage with the needs and issues of surrounding communities is perhaps most palpably witnessed in the practices of some ERTs that notably extend their cooperative interests beyond the walls of the firm and into the community.

While many ERTs open up their doors to the community, the transformations of community values and attitudes experienced by workers have encouraged some ERTs to integrate into their very business practices social missions that see them *sharing* portions of their revenues, workers' skills, and the firm's productive capacities with the community, which essentially extends their productive efforts out into surrounding communitis *territorially*. Some of the most celebrated ERTs such as Zanón/FaSinPat and the Hotel BAUEN, for example, have expanded their business focus to include community economic development projects right into their *raison d'être*.

Similarly, the waste management cooperative in my study, UST, has not only taken on and trained another 60 cooperative members that were formerly

unemployed residents from surrounding *barrios* since its founding as an ERT in 2004, it has also deeply involved itself in numerous community development and neighbourhood empowerment projects. UST, for instance, has built 100 attractive town homes to replace precarious housing for its own members and other neighborhood residents. In addition, the coop built and continues to support a youth sports complex in the local neighborhood, an alternative media workshop and radio program, and heads up a unique plastics recycling initiative for the large low-income housing project located near its plant.

UST's community interventions also tightly interlace its community economic development model with cultural production and popular memory, witnessed in its promotion of traditional Argentine music festivals, youth education, sports, and popular theatre. Indeed, this outward commitment to surrounding communities is tangible in UST workers' daily narratives, which consistently identify their community initiatives with past Argentine workers' struggles and the contemporary struggles of the neighborhood. Grounding its community economic development projects within cultural imaginaries and popular social memories has deeply engrained UST into the heart of the surrounding neighborhood, becoming one of the most important social and cultural hubs of the *barrio*.

Evocatively, ERTs' socio-economic mergers with surrounding communities ultimately begin to rupture the "capitalist secret" (Ruggeri, 2009: 79)—the proprietary nature of the capitalist paradigm enclosing production and work within the closed walls of a firm from the community outside. These community-enterprise fusions, it has been further argued, point to productive practices that extend beyond competition. In Argentina, ERTs have thus been called *la fabrica abierta* (the open factory) (Vieta, 2012: 483).

ERTs as Transformative Learning Organizations

Through the example of Argentina's *empresas recuperadas* and the theoretical framework of class-struggle analysis and workplace and social action learning, this article has sought to better understand the connection between the processes of learning "through struggle" and the transformative nature of worker-recuperated firms for worker-members, their organizational and labour processes, and for the communities within which these firms are situated. The transformations that take hold of ERT protagonists—from employees to self-managed workers—unfold over time as workers collectively strive to overcome macro- and micro-economic crises and learn to become cooperators. This learning, as I discussed in the empirical section of the article, happens in two ways: *intra-cooperatively* via *informal* workplace learning as workers struggle together to establish their cooperative, and *inter-cooperatively* between workers from different ERTs and with surrounding community groups. In turn, the new, cooperative and

community-centred values and practices ERT workers acquire over time sketch out different possibilities for economic and productive life in Argentina. ERTs are thus *transformative learning organizations*.

Most broadly, ERTs facilitate three broad social transformations. First, ERTs *transform workers*. Out of moments of macro- and micro-economic crises, most poignantly felt by these workers as crises at the point of production, ERT protagonists change from being employees, to defensive workers set on saving their jobs, to, ultimately, proactive social change agents that go on to found co-operatives with positive impacts for surrounding communities. In essence, ERT protagonists' transformed subjectivities first arise from out of collective actions in response to conjunctures of micro-economic crises. Their transformations continue to unfold collectively in striving to consolidate their firms and learn the intricacies of self-management. These subjective transformations—"*sobre la marcha*," in the act of cooperating and doing self-management—underscore the intimate connections between the myriad challenges ERT workers collectively tackle and the collaborative and informal learning that takes place within each ERT.

Second, ERTs *transform work organizations*. With ERTs, hierarchical capitalist workplaces become horizontal and cooperative work arrangements. These transformations evolve as ERT workers engage in working out challenges and learn self-management together. Practically, they can be seen in the regular meeting of workers' assemblies and the transparency and rotating membership of workers' councils, in shop floor practices where workers collaborate to learn new skills and actively practice on-the-job mentoring, in the use of ad hoc work groups specially catered to production needs, in their flexible production processes moving beyond alienating capitalist specialization, in their more humanized work environments, and most radically, in opening up firms to the community. Here, my study's qualitative findings coincide with heterodox economic research that explores the increase in worker well-being that comes with democratic governance structures and workplace participation (Erdal, 2011; Pérotin, 2012), and the higher degrees of worker satisfaction, motivation, and even productivity at self-managed firms (Becchetti *et al.*, 2012; Craig and Pencavel, 1992; Erdal, 2000, 2011; Oakeshott, 2000; Pérotin, 2006, 2012).

Third, ERTs *transform communities*. ERTs both symbolically and practically break down the walls that divide work inside a factory from the rest of life outside of it. That is, ERT workers extend their *compañerismo* to the communities outside of the firm and begin to engage in myriad non-marketized forms of social production with surrounding neighborhoods and community groups. ERT workers have a vested interest in surrounding communities because they also live there and because these communities assisted ERT workers in transforming firms

into worker coops. Most profoundly, overcoming injustices within the workplace translates, for many ERT protagonists, into projects that assist in overcoming injustices outside of the firm. As with other experiments in economic democracy, ERTs thus help forge "more cohesive communities" (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010: 259). Coraggio and Arroyo (2009) suggestively describe these strong ERT-community links as merged "time-space distances of factory, neighborhood, home, and work" that begin to "replace the heteronomy of the capitalist production line and its distance from the life-world" (146).

These three social transformations underscore the potential for alternative economic arrangements of production rooted in community-sensitive social enterprises. They highlight how social transformation can emerge from workers' recuperations of formerly investor-owned workplaces in crisis, and from workers' inherent processes of informal learning catalyzed by struggles to overcome macro- and micro-economic crises collectively. From out of the tensions and challenges ERT workers face in the struggle to secure jobs, take over workplaces, and self-determine their working lives in Argentina, these workers eventually go on to learn about, co-invent, and collaboratively implement new cooperative organizational arrangements and more socialized economies.

Notes

1 For more details on my methodological decisions and case study selection process, see: Vieta (2012).

2 These new ERT labour associations and organizations formed in the past 15 years or so as traditional unions on the whole failed to adequately represent the needs of ERT workers. Their function in the ERT movement is multi-faceted: They are representative organizations that lobby the Argentine state for the continuation of pension benefits and workers' rights, and the reform of business, coop, and labour laws that would ease the creation of new ERTs and the consolidation of older ERTs. They also function as organizations that work with more sympathetic unions, with some traditional cooperative movement organizations, and with universities and research centres in order to assist with the business needs of ERTs and, increasingly, their members' acquisition of new skills, capacities, and training in the ins and outs of self-management. For more on the role of ERT umbrella organizations, see Faulk (2013) and Vieta (2012).

3 For similar findings concerning the role of *compañerismo* in acting as a social and cultural glue for worker cooperative members, see Cheney (2002).

4 Mentor-apprentice forms of learning, of course, are prevalent in many work environments throughout the world. They are a fundamental way that skills and trades are learned and passed on and, historically, long predate the capitalist era. This learning strategy is particularly evident in Argentina's ERTs in both the narratives of the workers and in the daily work that can be observed at these firms.

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SUMMARY

Learning in Struggle: Argentina's New Worker Cooperatives as Transformative Learning Organizations

This article considers Argentina's *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (worker-recuperated enterprises, or ERTs) as *transformative learning organizations*. ERTs are illustrative of how workers' conversions of capitalist firms into worker cooperatives—especially conversions emerging from troubled firms and in moments of deep socio-economic crises—transform workers (from managed employees to self-managed workers), work organizations (from capitalist businesses to labour-managed firms), and communities (from depleted to revitalized and self-provisioning localities).

Theoretically, the study is grounded in class-struggle, workplace learning, and social action learning approaches. These theoretical perspectives help the study work through how workplace conversions by workers, when converting troubled investor-owned or proprietary firms into worker coops, act as catalysts for contesting workplace exploitation and capitalist crises, while also beginning to move beyond them by forging new social relations of production and exchange. In the case of Argentina's ERTs, crises in the political economy and micro-economic crises at the point of production during the collapse of the neoliberal model at the turn of the millennium heightened workers' self-awareness of their situations of exploitation and motivated collective action. As a result, new worker cooperatives were created that also stimulated the social, cultural, and economic renewal of surrounding communities.

The study's research method relies on extended case studies of four diverse ERTs, which included ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews. Observations of daily workflows were conducted, as well as interviews and informal conversations with founding and newer ERT workers. In a more structured portion of the interview protocol, key-informants were asked to reflect on how they had personally changed after being involved in the ERT, and how production practices and involvement with the community had transformed in the process of conversion.

The article concludes by outlining how worker, organizational, and community transformations emerge from workers' processes of *informal learning* and *learning in struggle* as they collectively strive to overcome macro- and micro-economic crises and learn to become cooperators. This learning, the study shows, occurs in two ways: *intra-cooperatively* via informal workplace learning, and *inter-cooperatively* between workers from different ERTs and with surrounding communities. The self-management forged by ERTs thus embodies new, cooperative, and community-centered values and practices for these workers that, in turn, sketch out different possibilities for economic and productive life in Argentina.

KEYWORDS: worker-recuperated enterprises, cooperation, workplace learning, social action learning, learning in struggle, business conversions, Argentina.

RÉSUMÉ

Apprendre par la lutte : les nouvelles coopératives de travailleurs en Argentine comme organisations d'apprentissage transformatrise.

Cet article présente les *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* en Argentine (entreprises rachetées par des travailleuses et des travailleurs ou ERT), comme des organisations d'apprentissage transformatrise. Les ERT illustrent bien comment des entreprises capitalistes converties en coopératives – particulièrement dans les cas de conversions de firmes aux prises avec de grandes difficultés et dans des périodes de graves crises socio-économiques – transforment les travailleurs (passant du statut d'employées et d'employés subordonnés à celui d'autogérés), les entreprises (d'entreprises capitalistes à des entreprises gérées par des travailleuses et des travailleurs) et les communautés (de localités à l'abandon à localités revitalisées et auto-suffisantes).

Sur le plan théorique, la présente étude puise ses fondements dans les travaux sur la lutte des classes, les théories sur le milieu de travail apprenant et l'action sociale apprenante. Ces perspectives théoriques aident à mieux comprendre comment les conversions de milieux de travail par des travailleurs,– quand on passe d'entreprises en difficultés détenues par des actionnaires ou des propriétaires à des coopératives de travailleurs –, agissent comme catalyseurs pour développer une contestation de l'exploitation au travail et des crises capitalistes, tout en permettant d'aller au-delà en façonnant de nouvelles relations sociales de production et d'échange. Dans le cas des ERT en Argentine, les crises, tant au niveau macro-économique qu'à celui des entreprises de production durant l'écrasement du modèle néolibéral au tournant du millénaire, ont servi à aiguiser la conscience des travailleurs quant à leurs conditions d'exploitation et ont motivé leur action collective. Comme résultat, de nouvelles coopératives de travailleurs ont vu le jour et ont permis de stimuler le renouveau social, culturel et économique des communautés environnantes.

La méthodologie de cette recherche s'appuie sur des études de cas élargies de quatre ERT, incluant l'observation ethnographique ainsi que des entrevues en profondeur. L'observation des processus quotidiens du travail, de même que des entrevues et des échanges informels avec des travailleurs fondateurs et nouveaux d'ERT, furent également menées. Dans une partie plus structurée du protocole d'entrevue, nous avons demandé à des informateurs-clés de réfléchir à la manière dont ils ont changé après leur implication dans l'ERT ainsi que comment les pratiques de production et d'engagement dans la communauté se sont transformées durant le processus de conversion.

L'article conclut en soulignant comment, les transformations des travailleurs, de l'organisation et de la communauté, émergent des processus d'apprentissage informel et d'apprentissage en situation de lutte des travailleurs à mesure qu'ils luttent collectivement pour passer au travers des crises macro- et micro-économiques et apprendre à devenir des coopérants. Cet apprentissage, comme le

montre l'étude, se concrétise de deux manières : intra-coopératif via l'apprentissage informel en milieu de travail, et inter-coopératif entre travailleuses et travailleurs de différentes ERT et avec les communautés avoisinantes. Ainsi l'autogestion développée à travers les ERT permet l'émergence de nouvelles valeurs et pratiques centrées sur la coopération et la communauté chez ces travailleurs permettant d'entrevoir de nouvelles opportunités de vie économique et productive en Argentine.

MOTS-CLÉS : entreprises autogérées, coopératives, apprentissage en milieu de travail, action sociale apprenante, apprentissage par la lutte, conversions d'entreprises, organisation d'apprentissage transformatrice, Argentine.

RESUMEN

Aprendiendo en la lucha: las nuevas cooperativas de trabajado en argentina como organizaciones de aprendizaje transformador

Este artículo considera las empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores argentinas (ERTs) como *organizaciones de aprendizaje transformador*, Las ERTs ilustran cómo las empresas capitalistas convertidas en cooperativas, – particularmente en el caso de conversiones de firmas que enfrentaron grandes dificultades durante los periodos de graves crisis socio-económicas –, transforman los trabajadores (que pasan de un estado de empleados subordinados a trabajadores autogestionados), las empresas (de empresas capitalistas a empresas dirigidas por los trabajadores) y las comunidades (de localidades abandonadas a localidades revitalizadas y autosuficientes).

A nivel teórico, el presente estudio se basa en los trabajos sobre la lucha de clases, las teorías sobre las formas de aprendizaje en el trabajo y la acción social. Estas perspectivas teóricas ayudan a comprender mejor cómo las conversiones de empresas por los trabajadores, cuando pasan de empresas en dificultad bajo propiedad de inversionistas o de propietarios de firmas a cooperativas de trabajadores, actúan como catalizadores para luchar contra la explotación y la crisis capitalista. Al mismo tiempo, comienzan el cambio mediante la emergencia de nuevas relaciones de producción y de intercambio. En el caso de las ERTs argentinas, la crisis en la economía política y las crisis micro-económicas en los centros de producción, ocurridas durante el colapso del modelo neoliberal con el advenimiento del nuevo siglo, aumentaron la conciencia de los trabajadores en situaciones de explotación y motivaron la acción colectiva. Como resultado, las nuevas cooperativas de trabajado fueron creadas, lo que estimuló también la renovación social, cultural y económica de las comunidades vecinas.

El método de investigación del estudio se basa en "estudios de casos extensos" de cuatro ERTs incluyendo la observación etnográfica y entrevistas en profundidad. Se realizaron observaciones cotidianas de los procesos de trabajo y se efectuaron en-

trevistas y conversaciones informales con antiguos y nuevos trabajadores de la ERT. En la porción más estructurada del protocolo de entrevista, se les pregunta cómo ellos han cambiado personalmente después de estar envuelto en la ERT, y cómo las prácticas de producción y la implicación con la comunidad se han transformado durante el proceso de conversión.

El artículo concluye explicando a grandes rasgos cómo las transformaciones laborales, organizacionales y comunitarias han emergido del proceso de aprendizaje informal y del aprendizaje en la lucha vivida por los trabajadores al mismo tiempo que ellos se esfuerzan por superar la crisis macro y micro-económica y aprender a devenir cooperativistas. Este aprendizaje, como este estudio lo muestra, ocurre de dos maneras: en el plano interno de la cooperación mediante el aprendizaje informal en el medio de trabajo y en el plano ínter-cooperativo, entre los trabajadores de diferentes ERTs, y con las comunidades vecinas. La autogestión forjada por las ERTs incorporan así nuevos valores y practicas cooperativas y comunitarias para estos trabajadores, lo que, a su turno, esboza diferentes posibilidades para la vida económica y productiva en Argentina.

PALABRAS CLAVES: empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores, sociedad cooperativa, aprendizaje en el trabajo, aprendizaje en la acción, aprendiendo en la lucha, conversiones de empresas, Argentina.