

The Case of Argentina: Recuperated Factories and the Multitude

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"Que se vayan todos!" [They all must go!]

Yelled by over a million Argentines, calling for the elimination of politicians in office during the 2001 economic collapse.

"Work that is liberated is liberation from work."

Toni Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*

When in the midst of Argentina's economic crisis the workers at Brukman, a garment factory, were locked out and barred from entering work, they found themselves subject to the global phenomenon of obsolescence.¹ What action can people take when their profession, neighborhood, or city become defined as obsolete overnight? How can they attempt to under stand the processes that easily produce them as useless when the forces of production have become nearly invisible? Day after day, peoples' labor skills and social positions change for the worse by constantly renewed conditions of production in the global economy. So, how do the socially obsolete possibly change their situation if they are always within the forces that define them as useless?

As a way to begin answering these challenges that some of us have faced and all of us potentially face, we can look to the specific case of Argentina. In December of 2001, with its economy sinking from its water mark high, a neo-liberal tidal wave crashed over the country, sweeping out to the depths of the ocean economic stability and radically changing the social landscape of the country. In the aftermath, as when the ocean tide lowers and exposes plants and creatures not visible during high-tide, so too did the disaster of Argentina reveal the resourcefulness and inventiveness of those most directly affected. The most interesting and dynamic responses to this crisis have come from wage laborers, people who have worked on the assembly line, or have occupied the lower rungs in the hierarchy of business. They have directly responded to their situation by occupying and eventually recuperating their places of work for themselves. This is no easy task as each place of work posed its own unique set of legal and bureaucratic problems, therefore eliminating any chance for workers to set an exact model for others to follow. The effect the workers have had in Argentina, and the attention they have generated throughout the world, have some people saying that this is not mere survival on the part of the workers, but a revolution.

Are the workers harnessing the winds of the economy, taking it for a ride? Or are they fighting a terrible storm, using all they can to protect themselves from its destruction? Aside from using (badly) strained and clichéd nature metaphors, not unlike the ones economists use, I want to discuss the economic collapse of Argentina, the response from the workers to this event, and finally, I want to briefly contextualize this in the larger discussion and theorization of the multitude, as discussed by Antonio Negri² as a way to think about connections to other struggles against the processes that make people useless, present or future. By referring to the multitude, I identify

possible strategies of refusal and of production through the models Argentina has offered us to think about capitalism, social organization, and the recuperation of space.

Argentina

The poster child of neo-liberalism, Argentina's economy soared during the 1990s. Equating the peso to the dollar, privatizing public resources while cutting social services, businesses profited mightily. But this period of economic prosperity started to become unstable by the closing of the '90s. Finally, in December 2001, the economy imploded, sparking "a mass uprising that brought literally millions of enraged Argentines into the streets against their government ... In the first ten days of this popular insurrection, no less than four presidents were installed and overthrown."³ In the aftermath, Argentina owed the IMF over 141 billion dollars, which it defaulted on, and the peso lost 78% of its value.⁴ At a certain point, the peso/dollar ratio was 4:1, now it hovers somewhere near 3:1.

Already before December 2001, there were signs the economy was dissolving and employees were the first to feel its dissolution. In certain industries, the relationship between workers and their bosses were strained due to dwindling pay checks and inconsistent periods of pay. A typical example: workers at Grissinopoli, a breadstick factory, had to endure a wage decline for almost a year. Their "weekly salary declined from 150 pesos to 100, then 40, which was then equivalent to 18 dollars. Finally, as the company was going towards bankruptcy, the workers demanded recompense. The managers offered \$4.50 and told them to leave."⁵

If a company went out of business, workers had to consider the arid economy, which left about 1 in 5 adults out of work⁶; that's "34% of the employable work force unemployed."⁷ The closure of businesses meant that the owners, in some instances, fled the country with cash, leaving the company owing money for gas, electricity, rent, and to companies who supply the raw materials for production. Around 70 billion U.S. dollars fled the country in the months surrounding the peak of the crisis.

To get a sense of the amount of loss in Argentina, and how value basically fled the country, the percentage of growth and productivity dropped from -4 in 2001, to -10.9 in 2002. When compared to the average of consumer prices, which jumped from -1.1 to 25.9, one can measure the magnitude of the impossibility of living. Jobs dropping while prices rising.⁸

Faced with debt and no viable alternatives from the outside, workers at Grissinopoli decided to stay and occupy the factory, rather than leave as the bosses demanded. While this appears to be an easy decision, its consequences were psychologically and physically demanding. For not only at Grissinopoli, but other places as well, occupying a factory meant exposure to the threat of police violence, which was not uncommon. Plus, occupying a factory did not guarantee recuperation. Workers at IMPA, a metal factory, occupied the plant for



months before they could begin production. Before making bread sticks, the people in Grissinopoli took shifts guarding the factory 24 hours a day, surviving on the spare change they collected from students at the public university and by selling food.⁹

The only option for many workers was to remake their situation by occupying abandoned factories. This spread into other areas not commonly associated with each other, affecting people who were socio-economically different. Places as distinct as a shipyard and a school, print shops and medical clinics, a hotel and a bread factory, a metal shop and clothing factory, were—to name but a few—recuperated areas of work. From the recuperation movement, the cooperatives have salvaged around 10,000 jobs. And while the recuperation of factories has created jobs without bosses, taking a closer look at the tasks one must perform complicates reducing this to a victory for the workers.

If the appropriation of private property by the workers threatens the very existence of capitalists, perhaps the emerging work ethic and formation of a new workers' consciousness appears horrifying to certain people on the left. Workers' statements, and the way they've been discussed in articles, eerily echo the work ethic and demands of a business owner or manager. The workers in one factory emphasized the need to be more careful when making their product because any ruined piece of cloth would come out of everyone else's pocket, not the bosses. Without bosses, work requires the need for mindful practices at work, reminding us of the banner in the film *Office Space* that asks employees: "Is this good for the company?" Workers at Ghelco rely solely on themselves to continue to live since they have no one to support them if they lose business. Says Norbert Monzon, president of the worker's cooperative at Ghelco, "Right at the beginning there was no one there for the average Argentine on the street. We're doing what we've always done, what we know we can do as well as anyone. And now we're doing it knowing that if we don't, there won't be a job, there won't be a paycheck." Showing that workers were always crucial to the value of a product, Jorge Lujan Gutierrez admits, "It was difficult to get started because even though the company (Chilavert, a print shop) had a reputation, people did not believe that we workers were capable of managing things. We had to show that the high level of quality was still intact and that the only thing missing was a few executives in the front office."¹⁰ As such concerns from consumers might suggest—concerns over maintaining high standards in the eyes of the old capitalist regime—the changes workers have had to make since recuper-

ating the factories casts them as students of scientific management or advanced marketing rather than budding revolutionaries. The drive to survive appears to translate to embracing capital. In fact, from the perspective that workers must also possess the skills and knowledge of an owner, recuperating a factory could really be seen as a crash-course lesson in starting one's own business.

In other instances, workers must adapt to the multiple demands placed on them. For an owner who downsizes a company while expecting workers to multitask and produce the same amount of work, Argentina is a wet dream. The workers at Ghelco acknowledge that life since the recuperation "has not been easy. Many are putting in 12-hour days as they juggle new managerial or administrative duties with their former production posts." Says one worker who labels containers and cleans the bathrooms when not greeting customers and clients as a receptionist: "The freedom of not having a boss is great, but we have a moral obligation to each other to work hard."¹¹

Sacrifice seems to be part and parcel of a recuperation. At Ghelco, by first working for little or no money, the cooperative's workers were able to boost production to 24 hours a day, six days a week. As a rule, everyone earns the same pay. Among others, Ghelco's success story encourages people to place a new emphasis on the worker as someone who is suddenly capable of participating in his/her future while simultaneously disproving the notion that capitalists are needed to organize production. Any celebration of this sorts, however, asks for reconsideration since we can easily shift the workers identity to that of an entrepreneur, one who works long hours as anyone in a start up company would. While working longer hours and increasing profit, the workers at Ghelco are less delusional, unlike entrepreneurs with visions of being the next Bill Gates or making millions on an invention like the Pet Rock.

Not earning millions, the workers are still able to mystify people who wonder out loud how workers can remake a business when "shrewd industrialists with an open credit line ran these companies into bankruptcy."¹² The questioning goes beyond simple business acumen and reveals rather the inability to imagine change, especially coming from below. And perhaps this is what scares capitalists and encourages the left. The worker, after having his/her opinion disregarded, all of sudden has a say in the company. From being told not to think, to having to learn how to run a business and make decisions on how to do it, the workers enter a transformation in his/her relation to production. No bosses means for workers no formal hierarchy, only direct control over their working environment and production of life. Successfully transformed places of work do not happen by the will of the workers or through the leadership of the individual; it's the collective will of the social. During the struggle to recuperate Brukman, a textile factory, the workers were joined by other recuperated factories, neighborhood assemblies, student organizations, and left-wing political parties who aided and supported their struggle. We see then the beginning of thinking about forms of the multitude, as Negri states: "Cooperation itself is part of that creativity of singular labour. It is no longer something that is imposed from outside. ... Singularities of and in the multitude have assumed cooperation as quality of their labour. Cooperation—and the common—as activity is anterior to capitalist accumulation."¹³ Considering the social relationships formed among disparate groups introduces the possibility of political organization beyond the limits imposed by capital. It is through the work of organizing, not work itself, that the case of Argentina becomes dangerous to capitalism since it initiates a possible transformation of subjectivities.

Transformation—multitude

Certainly the recuperation of factories is not necessarily overturning capital. In fact it is very much complicit with it. However, we must also recognize the necessity for these people to make money to live. In most cases the drive to recuper-

ate factories was the expression of the desire to work. As one worker stated her reason for occupying the factory: "we just wanted to keep coming to work."¹⁴ This decision to continue working does not free the worker from the toils of labor or the demands of capital. Yet there is a significant difference in this attitude when we compare it to similar kinds of businesses in the United States. If we think of cooperatively owned businesses in the United States, they seem to exist from an option of several business models. And places such as organic grocery stores or outdoor equipment warehouses, at times, are not only downright expensive, and play really bad classic rock, but project a particular lifestyle reminiscent of the grooviness of the '60s. When looking at Argentina, the workers most likely did not have this in mind. "Just wanting to work," conveys a desire to produce life, not to acquire a life-style.

In addition to not overthrowing capitalism, the recuperation of factories isn't a refusal of work as when, for instance, workers deliberately sabotage their equipment or reduce the level of production. Neither is it a celebration of work, or of confirming or celebrating a worker's identity as central to the struggle for economic equality and better life. The recuperations are positive acts that have the power to disrupt. The desires implicit in the drive to recuperate express a common need. Thus to communicate the workers practices and struggles beyond local experiences and translate them to the level of the global, they must be framed using different terms and conceptual models. If the case of Argentina teaches the world anything, it suggests that we must think beyond the confines of a subjectivity already produced and ensconced by capital, or the State. Protesting against, for example, the IMF as a concerned computer programmer from California, or resisting the policies of the Homeland Security as a member of the Ayn Rand Society, merely reproduces the logic of capital, strengthening it, reforming it. These are the same people who use their Union to bargain in favor of playing the radio during work so they can endure the day. With the radio on, any work schedule seems possible, and life is tolerable. Against this, the multitude is a positive force from which to disrupt predictable structures of resistance.

The recuperations are a dynamic form of organization, an "organization" of singularities, where in singularities are produced by subjectivities who want to live and who engage with a "cooperation that is beyond measure." The multitude, a coalescence of a singularity, frees us from thinking of revolution, of making change through work by the worker, or through a specific concern expressed through a group, like the Sierra Club. In this sense, multitudes are not predetermined subjects produced or apprehended by capital. They emerge as being endlessly creative in their social and political relation to the global. Importantly, Negri's notion of the multitude insists that the "the multitude is a social agent, a multiplicity that acts. Unlike the people, the multitude is not a unity, but as opposed to the masses and the plebs, we can see it as something organized."¹⁵ This organization is unlike traditional forms seen from social or political movements. The activity of organization emerges from participating in something lived rather than planned: "the unemployed, the one who was fired from the factory, or even worse, the one who remains excluded and has never yet entered the factory or the productive society, all of these are equally part, they all participate, in the multitude. They participate in the social activity. It is social activity in which one that creates value. It's not the participation in the labor commanded by capital."¹⁶ The value created by the multitude moves beyond exchange value, or the value of the worker in relation to labor, and strives toward making and ensuring the production of social activity not based on the demands of the market.

For work, and as seen in the recuperated factories, this suggests new forms of labor that do not interpolate the worker. And perhaps what is subversive about the case of Argentina is not the workers taking over factories, but workers disappearing as we know them, resisting representation

and initiating forms of counterpower. The reified subject dissolves, and instead emerges as a political subject who struggles to live.

To bring this back into the multitude of Argentina, we can consider the words of Osvaldo Perez, a machinist and president of the co-operative Metal Varela aluminium factory: "Some people are saying that we're not capitalists, but we're still working within capitalism. The truth is, what we most want is to be well off, to live well."¹⁷ Perhaps the multitude shouts this, confirms itself in the positive drive to create meaningful forms of life. "Que se vayan todos!" is not just a cry for the elimination of politicians, but of hierarchical forms of production and social organization. Since 2001, this cry echoes throughout the multitude, signalling the fading into memory of a traditional worker and initiating an emerging subjectivity in transition that knows, "work which is liberated is liberation from work."

Notes

1. For more information about Argentina's financial and political crisis, and labor and social movements, see Znet's extensive collection of articles, available at: <http://www.zmag.org/ZNET.htm>
Also, see Estaban Magnani's *El Cambio Silencioso: Empresas y F-bricas Recuperadas por los Trabajadores en la Argentina*. Published by Prometeo in Argentina.
2. In addition to Negri's own work, see his collaborative works with Michael Hardt on the multitude, *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004).
3. Jim Straub, "Argentina's Piqueteros and Us" www.TomDispatch.com, 2004.
4. Alan Cibils and Martha Farmelo, "Argentina's IMF Agreement: A Squandered Opportunity," Americas Program, Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) May 2003. <http://www.americaspolicy.org/reports/2003/0305argentina.html>
5. Reed Lindsay, "Job action at failed factories." *Toronto Star*, 17th November 2002.
6. Patrice M. Jones, "Argentina finds beauty in a business model," *Chicago Tribune* 25 May 2003. Found at LACYORK—the listserv of the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean at York University (CERLAC).
7. Straub, "Argentina's Piqueteros".
8. " Argentina: Economy: 5-year forecast," *The Economist* www.viewswire.com/index.asp?layout=display_article&doc_id=337599.
9. Lindsay, "Job Action".
10. Larry Rohter, "Workers in Argentina Take Over Abandoned Factories," *New York Times*, 9th July 2003.
11. Lindsay "Job Action".
12. Lindsay "Job Action".
13. Toni Negri and Paolo Virno, " Public Sphere, labour, multitude. Strategies of resistance in Empire." Seminar organised by Officine Precarie in Pisa. Coordinator: Marco Bascetta. [5th February 2003].) Transcription & translation by Arianna Bove. Emphasis in original.
14. Lindsay "Job Action".
15. Antonio Negri, "Approximations: Towards an Ontological Definition of the Multitude." Translated by Arianna Bove.
16. Lecture delivered by Antonio Negri at Grissinopoli, 27 October 2003. The following transcribed lecture was forwarded by Dr. Marcelo Matellanes, professor at the University of Buenos Aires. It was translated from the Italian into Castellano by two anonymous members of the audience. It was translated from Castellano into English by Guillermina Seri.
17. Lindsay, "Job Action".

Acknowledgements

A version of this paper was presented in March 2004, at the conference "Catastrophe Now: The Wreckage of Utopia," organized by the Marxist Reading Group at the University of Florida, Gainesville (www.english.ufl.edu/mrg).

For their comments and encouragement, I would like to thank Guillermina Seri, Brian Meredith, Anton Janulis, and Ross Birrell.

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