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Debate

The Dream of Dignified Work: On Good and Bad Utopias

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To what extent are recent labour upsurges defensive struggles? This essay uses the experience of the Argentinean Movement of Unemployed Workers (also called the Piquetero movement) as the empirical basis for discussing the contribution of unemployed workers to the current reshaping of the labour question. The author offers an alternative interpretation of the Piqueteros' experience of resistance that emphasizes their critique and alternative visions, and the transformations and alternatives that the movement put forward at a time when 'labour' was said to be defeated. The struggles of the unemployed workers in Argentina during the 1990s should not be classified as a defensive struggle for inclusion in the labour market, or as a demand for social security (although these demands were significant in the Piqueteros' agenda); rather they should be seen as advancing significant changes at identity/organizational, socioeconomic and political institutional levels. These changes deserve special attention in terms of their significance for the re-shaping of the labour question in the twenty-first century. The Piquetero utopia of dignified work does not rely on state policy such as Universal Income Support. Instead, the state and policy are mediations of the autonomous struggle for the prefigurations of a better society.

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INTRODUCTION

'Like this, the identity of the unemployed worker ceases to be a lack to become a process of self-affirmation' (MTD, 2002, 142)

In this contribution to the Forum Debate, I engage with scholarly work that addresses the following question: to what extent are recent labour upsurges defensive struggles? I use the experience of the Argentinean Movement of Unemployed Workers (also called the Piquetero movement) as my empirical basis for discussing the contribution of unemployed workers to the current reshaping of the labour question.

On 15 December 1993, hundreds of civil servants rioted, setting fire to the provincial government house in Santiago del Estero in northern Argentina. The riot shocked the country, and was interpreted by the government as an angry reaction by public-sector workers who were seeing their wages reduced by law, at a time of rapid public-sector reforms, decentralization of health and education services, and provincial economic adjustments. The ‘Santiagazo’ was, however, just the first of a series of similar protests that made apparent that market-led policies (privatization, breakdown of institutions, regressive income distribution, unemployment, poverty) had created what Biekart (2005: 2) called a ‘time-bomb that only needed to spark off’ in Latin America. The pegging of the peso to the dollar by means of the 1991 Convertibility plan had defeated hyperinflation and, after the preceding decades of economic instability, reassured Argentineans of the economic stability that was required to achieve competitiveness and economic growth. However, the stabilization policies implemented by the neoliberal government of President Carlos Menem as part of the structural adjustment programme of the Washington Consensus (including the IMF), effectively *destabilized* workers’ jobs and lives, by the deregulation of the labour market, the commodification of pension and risk-at-work schemes, the implementation of wage-by-productivity systems, and above all, through mass unemployment, calling the discourse of ‘stability’ into question.

In June 1996 and March 1997, two popular uprisings gripped the small towns of Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincul in Neuquén, Patagonia. They began with a general strike by teaching unions against the decentralization of education was supported by youngsters aged fourteen to twenty: over the course of several days, armed with slingshots, sticks, stones and some Molotov cocktails, they confronted 400 gendarmes. These events were followed by a series of actions by the unemployed, with local trade union support, which spread across the north of the country (Salta and Jujuy provinces). The actions included blocking the major roads, but their significance extended well beyond the roadblocks. They were a form of protest that mobilized entire local communities to render unemployment and lack of investment ‘visible’, and to resist state repression until negotiations (usually mediated by the

Church) took place to discuss social programmes and benefits, job creation, discounts in gas and electricity bills, and productive investments in the area.

In June 1997, under the title ‘Argentina: Provincial Lessons’, *The Economist* stated: ‘Jujuy province, in the far north-west, is not often the centre of Argentine interest ... But the questions it raises affect the entire country’ (*The Economist*, 1997: 60). The *Economist* report suggested that the turmoil produced during the blockage of the M34 in Libertador General San Martín in May 1997 could spread throughout Argentina. The World Bank offered to help the government with a new line of credit to control social protest. The Commission for the Analysis of Social Conflict was created and the Armed Forces studied the situation, elaborating a potential plan in case of ‘social chaos’¹

Although the protests could be repressed and controlled, there was another process at work in these areas deeply affected by the privatization, public-sector reforms and company restructuring that escaped state regulation. At the roadblocks, a new movement, the Movement of Unemployed Workers (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados, MTD), or Piquetero movement, was emerging. These names designate a heterogeneous movement composed of a variety of unconnected and dissimilar unemployed worker organizations (UWOs) that were formed in the mid-1990s. In the following years, organized unemployed workers became protagonists of the process of mobilization that had become national by July 2001 and which built up to the popular uprising of December 2001 against the neoliberal government of de la Rúa.

The Piqueteros’ collective action was initially pigeonholed as a critique of mass unemployment and, therefore, as a struggle for *inclusion* made from outside. In the words of Favaro et al. (1997: 27): ‘This unprecedented protest occurred in the oil areas of Neuquén as a paradigm of confrontation which began with the action of a group of young people in an unequal society, who, unlike those in the 1970s, do not fight to change the system but to get into it’ The centrality of the Movement of Unemployed Workers in the mobilization of Argentine society during the 1990s, however, signalled a turning point in the history of labour resistance in Argentina — a country with a powerful (mainly Peronist) state-sponsored trade union movement — and raised several questions about working class identity, the labour movement, the relation between labour and the social, and labour and the state, and more generally, about the role of the unemployed in labour resistance.

¹ ‘Las Fuerzas Armadas también analizan situaciones de crisis. [The Armed Forces also analyze the situation of crisis], *Clarín*, 27 May 1997, available at [Digital Clarín, http://edant.clarin.com/diario/1997/05/27/t-00401d.htm](http://edant.clarin.com/diario/1997/05/27/t-00401d.htm), accessed 4 July 2014

In this contribution, I offer an alternative interpretation of the Piquetero experience of resistance that will enable me to discuss, first, the nature of their critique and the transformations and alternatives that the movement put forward at a time when ‘labour’ was said to be defeated, and, second, the possibility that achieving stability rested on this defeat. My argument is that the struggles of the unemployed workers in Argentina during the 1990s should not be classified as a defensive struggle for inclusion in the labour market or as a demand for social security (although these demands were significant in the Piqueteros’ agenda), but rather as advancing significant changes at identity/organizational, socioeconomic and political institutional levels — changes that deserve special attention in terms of their significance for the reshaping of the labour question in the twenty-first century. In what follows, I examine and discuss what I consider the three main contributions of the Piquetero movement to labour struggles in Argentina and to the labour question in general.

PIQUETEROS: CHANGING THE FACE OF ‘STABILITY’

Identities of Resistance: The Unemployed as a Labour Collective

The first contribution of the Piqueteros to labour struggles was the constitution of a labour collective and an identity of resistance that also challenged many of the assumptions and practices of the labour movement. The mobilization of unemployed workers in Argentina in the mid-1990s and early 2000s challenged the hypothesis that unemployed workers constitute a sector of the working class which is unlikely to form its own autonomous collective identity, since they no longer share the work experience, or have never worked. This hypothesis is based on the belief that the sphere of production is *the* place where a shared experience, a collective purpose and a sense of identity are achieved among workers. For Jahoda et al. (1972), paid work is the tool necessary to satisfy fundamental human needs; for Cole (2007: 1134) it facilitates the attainment of a ‘shared experience, structured experience of time, collective purpose, status and identity and the requirement for “regular activity”’. If work ‘holds things together’ and provides a ‘centre to society’ (Stenning, 2005: 238), unemployment has devastating and demoralizing effects on people (Cole, 2007: 1134). Piven and Cloward (1977: 11–12) suggest that ‘the loss of work and the disintegration of communities mean[s] a loss of the regulating activities, resources and relationships on which the structure of everyday life depends, and thus the erosion of the structures that bind people to existing social arrangements’. The social epidemic of unemployment is

materialized in symptoms such as social helplessness (Kessler, 1996: 119), due to the experiences of stratification and impoverishment, and the impact of these on personal identity and self-worth and on everyday family and social life.

Research on class, identity and the maintenance of a collective orientation among unemployed workers, however, reveals that under certain circumstances the unemployed might redefine their personal hardship as collective rather than as individual adversity (Piven and Cloward, 1977: 49; Chatterton, 2005). Hannington's autobiographic story of the struggles of British unemployed workers between the two world wars (Hannington, 1936/1977), Harris's study of the link between unemployment, politics and policy in England for the period 1886–1914 (Harris, 1972/1984) and Piven and Cloward's (1977) discussion of the dilemmas of the Workers' Alliance of America in the US, all offer historical accounts of the complexity of such 'collective' struggle.

Unemployment has been the focus of a wide variety of studies, from the relationship between the unemployed and trade unions, to the politics of unemployment. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Anglo-Saxon 'underclass' debate framed the discussion around the possible mobilization of the unemployed. A study of redundant steel workers from five Welsh plants by MacKenzie et al. (2006: 837) reveals that 'the occupational community, whilst important to notions of collectivism, also served as a means to articulate class-based identity'. Redundancy can, in some cases, be a *social* experience, enabling the sharing of different coping strategies and promoting perceptions of self-worth. MacKenzie et al. (ibid: 848) found 'deep rooted and ongoing commitment to a collective orientation' in the community of former steel workers (see also Tomaney et al., 1999). Other studies have explored the economic, social and political dynamics in the mobilization of unemployed workers' networks (such as Action Chômage), within the broader struggle for Social Europe (Mathers, 1999; Taylor and Mathers, 2002).

In Argentina, the mobilization of unemployed workers allowed for the formation of a new labour subject. UWOs articulated a new 'labour' identity that combined both an identity of resistance (the Piqueteros) and a work identity (unemployed workers). This new labour subject was represented by organizations run by the unemployed themselves, independently from trade unions and political parties (although, in some cases, in coalition with them). Since they represent a variety of subjects, the UWOs are flexible organizations and articulate a variety of forms of intervention and strategic orientations that are usually the reserve of NGOs, social movements, trade unions and political activists (Dinerstein et al., 2010). The UWOs revitalized and reinvented the culture of work in devastated communities, and dealt

with a variety of demands, acting as job agencies, organizing training centres, creating work and housing cooperatives, defending the environment, and providing education and training for the young unemployed in the neighbourhoods. For example, the Unemployed Workers' Union (Union de Trabajadores Desocupados, UTD), in the municipality of General Mosconi in the province of Salta, acts as a 'quasi trade union' for the unemployed. The UTD keeps a register with personal details and job history of unemployed workers and actively searches for jobs for them. The UTD signs 'social peace' collective agreements with the local government or local firms; if these are broken, it organizes industrial and strike actions (Dinerstein et al., 2010).²

The autonomous collective actions of the Piquetero organizations have had a significant impact on the Argentinian labour movement. During the neoliberal reform, the Peronist union bureaucracy — mainly gathered in the General Labour Confederation (CGT) — distanced themselves from 'the unemployed' who they believed were 'unemployed from nowhere' (many had never entered the labour market) and could not, therefore, be represented by trade unions. These Peronist unions decided to defend their financial and bargaining power. They not only endorsed privatization of state-owned companies (leading to unemployment), the flexibilization of labour (leading to casualization), and the deregulation of safety at work and pensions systems (leading to instability), but participated actively, and successfully, in the *business* that these reforms generated (outsourcing, subcontracting, investments).

In 1992, a new confederation, the Argentine Workers Central (Central de Trabajadores Argentinos, CTA) emerged as a pole of opposition to both neoliberal reforms and the CGT, which it considered 'an appendix of conservative politics'.³ Some 500 unions gathered at the National Union Meeting for the National Project (Encuentro Sindical por el Proyecto Nacional) to discuss criteria for the construction of a new trade unionism in Argentina, to which the representation of the 'socially excluded' would be central. The new CTA challenged the traditional state-sponsored Peronist unionism. It proposed three new premises: independence from the state, independence from political parties, and direct affiliation to the central union, the latter to include the unemployed and those who were technically socially excluded. These three premises stood against the three pillars of previous

² In the case of the UTD in Mosconi, if a company does not conform to the agreement, the UTD organizes forms of direct action: 'access blockades' (*corte de acceso*) by UTD members, which prevent the flow of trucks in and out of the company; and 'production line stoppages' (*corte de línea*) inside the company by those who have been hired temporarily through the UTD (Dinerstein, 2013)

³ See the newspaper *Página/12*, 8 November 1992, p.4.

forms of trade unionism: statism, political dependence on the Peronist *justicialista* movement, and centralization and bureaucratization of the labour movement. At the level of the workplace, they encouraged individual membership and a relationship between the individual workers and the central union. At the political level, they aimed to give voice to the public sector and state workers as well as the diversity of subjects emerging from the process of transformation such as the unemployed, pensioners and the poor.

The CTA also introduced a direct vote for affiliates so that individual workers, unemployed workers, pensioners and other social groups could join the central union and vote for the executive committee directly, avoiding the traditional hierarchical system. More importantly, in August 1997, the CTA convened the First National Meeting for the Unemployed with the local and provincial representatives of the unemployed and other social groups taking part. The idea was to raise awareness of the existing commissions for the unemployed, to discuss their organization at the national level, and to overcome prevailing perceptions. While the unemployed present at the meeting were reluctant to join a trade union confederation, trade union activists, for their part, saw few reasons for including the unemployed; they could, for instance, provide very little financial contribution to the trade union (Dinerstein, 2001). This began to change after the meeting in August 1997, when the CTA invited grassroots activists who had been involved in land occupation in El Tambo, Greater Buenos Aires during the 1980s, to create the Land and Housing Federation (Federación Tierra Vivienda y Habitat, FTV), which works with housing and work cooperatives among the unemployed in La Matanza, Greater Buenos Aires.

Cooperation, Production and Social Change in the Commons

The second way in which the Piquetero movement challenged the ‘defensive’ characterization of unemployed workers’ struggles was by implementing cooperative and productive projects in the communities and neighbourhoods. Progressively, the UWOs moved from protest and claim-making to a territorial collective action that used protest at the roadblocks to develop cooperative forms of work and social activities in the neighbourhoods (e.g. housing cooperatives, training and education, environmental projects). These were to generate ‘genuine’ and ‘dignified’ work and democratic and solidarity practices, in collaboration with other popular movements, social organizations, local trade unions and small businesses. These endeavours addressed both everyday community problems and long-

term issues and were driven by the desire to work and create in solidarity, against a background of hunger, crime, alcoholism, poverty and disillusionment produced or intensified by neoliberalism. The community ventures deal with a wide range of everyday requirements such as recycling, community farms, soup kitchens, refurbishing public buildings and houses, helping in retirement homes, health care visits to the ill and disabled, production of regional crafts, carpentry, cleaning the jungle undergrowth, and maintaining and repairing schools and hospital emergency rooms. In so doing, the cooperative projects focus on long-term sustainability linked to housing, education and environmental protection (Dinerstein, 2010: 359).

As the Piquetero arm of the CTA, the FTV used its experience of land occupation and social intervention to develop a collective sense of community and a complex network of relationships around social enterprises of various kinds in demarcated areas of La Matanza. This UWO has developed countless activities addressing housing needs, child care, community soup kitchens, supply of milk at school, clothing needs, health facilities, delivery of goods, bakeries, textile cooperatives, various kinds of training, water cooperatives, sports facilities, literacy tutoring, health promotion, and improved sanitation of streams and canals.

One of the autonomous groups within the movement — the Unemployed Workers Network Aníbal Verón (Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados Aníbal Verón, CTDAV) — regards engagement with community development as a dimension of a wider project of social transformation towards a post-capitalist society. The aims of CTDAV go beyond the demands for ‘income distribution’ and ‘social inclusion’ which characterize the strategy of the FTV; rather than aiming to take power from the state (as the UWOs related to the various parties of the Left do), CTDAV’s political project rejects exploitation. Direct democracy and participation in decision-making processes are central to this project. CTDAV strives to make its everyday routines in the neighbourhoods the political reflection of a process of creating solidarity links and practices. Popular education allows for the development of a permanent debate about the meaning of the work in the commons, the identity of the Piqueteros, and their role in wider processes of political change (see Chatterton, 2005). In this case, the UWOs’ democratizing campaign is directed against front-line workers (Punteros) who make political use of social programmes and maintain the existing clientelistic system among the poor, which makes them dependent on favours from Party members who have access to policy-making channels (Auyero, 2000).

The Politics of Policy: Piqueteros with, against and beyond the State

The third change brought by the Piquetero movement that challenges the idea that struggles of unemployed workers are merely defensive is the UWOs' influence on state policy. The roadblocks became a new form of protest that qualitatively changed the direction of the 'labour' conflict in Argentina in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The UWOs used the roadblocks to politicize issues surrounding unemployment; the political influence that they gained as a result of this collective action was reaffirmed by the involvement of the UWOs in joint actions with other movements around a variety of issues, many of which provoked a response of severe repression of the UWOs by the state.⁴

The roadblocks forced the government to talk to the UWOs; as a result of these negotiations, the UWOs became administrators of employment programmes on behalf of the unemployed. Clearly, state institutions and types of social and employment policy shape the struggles of the unemployed (Bagguley, 1991: 70). In the case of Argentina, many of the focused employment programmes launched from the late 1990s onwards included the possibility that beneficiaries could work in civil society community projects as workfare.⁵ These types of workfare programmes are argued to have 'favoured common interests and identities on the part of unemployed workers and grassroots associations allowing them to overcome barriers to collective action' (Garay, 2007: 301). In my view, the UWOs created opportunities to access state resources by getting into the interstices of policy and the law. The UWOs' ventures are funded by state programmes, but this means that they fight for the re-appropriation of social programmes for collective purposes (Dinerstein, 2010; Svampa and Pereyra, 2003). In the absence of a universal employment benefit, the UWOs demanded that the government relinquish their management of focused schemes, social programmes and individual support payments made to the unemployed, who in turn undertake a task allocated by the council. Instead, the UWOs proposed that they would distribute a fixed amount of benefits among those unemployed workers who were registered with the organization, and were willing to undertake community work that has been decided upon by that community

⁴ Several UWOs are named after activists who were killed at roadblocks: the Teresa Rodríguez Movement, the Unemployed Workers Network Aníbal Verón (CTDAV) and the Frente Popular Darío Santillán. The latter took the name of one of two young unemployed activists of the CTDAV who were assassinated by the police in June 2002 during a roadblock in greater Buenos Aires (the other was Maximiliano Kosteki) (see MTD Aníbal Verón, 2003). The killing represented the climax of the government's repressive strategy, and caused a shift in the institutional politics of the country.

⁵ Examples of these are the Work Programme (TRABAJAR I, II and III); the Programme for Unemployed Male and Female Head of Household (Programa de Jefas y Jefes de Hogar Desocupado).

(Dinerstein, 2013). This means that rather than allocating social schemes to individual unemployed, the government allocated the funds to the UWOs, which in turn reallocated the benefits among the unemployed who work in projects meeting the needs of the community, rather than workfare. The UWOs thus transformed individualistic workfare social policy into collective and meaningful community and cooperative ventures, funded by state resources but serving the purpose of creating ‘genuine’ work and contributing to social integration and political participation. This explains why, in addition to calling themselves Piqueteros, the unemployed regarded themselves as unemployed ‘workers’. As I have argued elsewhere (Dinerstein, 2013: 50), “‘unemployed workers’ are simultaneously “workers” in projects run by the UWOs (e.g. housing construction) and “recipients” of state programmes’. As a female unemployed worker from the MTD Solano put it: ‘I work as an unemployed worker since 2001’ (MTD, 2002, quoted in Dinerstein, 2013: 50)

When Néstor Kirchner became president in 2003, the extraordinary achievements that had allowed the UWOs to be both oppositional as well as creative, ‘simultaneously maintain[ing] high levels of grassroots mobilisation and organisation, and ...implement[ing] autonomous endeavours that have influenced both local communities and the politics of the country’ (Dinerstein, 2013: 50) were recognized as matching the government’s goal of encouraging the ‘culture of work’ and ‘job creation’ policies. UWO principles of the social and solidarity economy were integrated into a new policy ethos, encouraging participation from below. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MTSS) and the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) offered different forms of financial and technical support to the UWOs’ projects.⁶ This came at a cost, however: the ‘NGO-ization’ (and depoliticization) of the UWOs. The UWOs were required to register as NGOs and face scrutiny from government inspectors who assessed the value of their proposed projects. Politically, the government isolated the UWOs that had worked closely with the political left and co-opted leaders of some UWOs into posts in the MDS and other government departments (Dinerstein, 2008).⁷

More recently, the process of integration of UWO policy from below into government

⁶ Government policies and projects included the 2003 National Plan for Local Development and Social Economy: Let’s Work! (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Local y Economía Social: Manos a la Obra); the Solidarity Funds for Development (Fondos Solidarios para el Desarrollo); Social Capital Funds (Fondos de Capital Social); and the Institutional Strengthening for Socio-Productive Development plan (Fortalecimiento Institucional para el Desarrollo Socio-Productivo); see MDS (2004 and 2005).

⁷ FTV’s leader Luis D’ Elía held several public posts that included Councillor in La Matanza and Sub-Secretary of Housing in 2006. Leaders of the UWO Barrios de Pie also occupied posts in the MDS.

policy has deepened with the programme ‘Argentina Works’ (Argentina Trabaja), initiated in 2009 (see MDS, 2009). With this programme the government not only committed to the attainment of decent work, as conceived by the International Labour Organization, and to the endorsement of the principles of the global cooperative movement, but intensified the state’s directly involvement in the creation of cooperatives from above (Kirchner, 2012: 191).⁸ The neo-developmentalism of President Cristina F. de Kirchner, a strategy based on national development led by the nation state in a global competitive economy, has embraced participation from below and given grassroots movements the role of defending their interests from below to obtain state support.

The ‘contested institutionalization’ of the UWOs’ cooperative practices (Dinerstein et al., 2010) meant the progressive translation of grassroots developments into the language of policy and state power, rendering invisible the radical edge of the autonomous projects and the pursuit of (non-capitalist) dignified work. The routinization of the UWOs’ collective action can be seen as both an achievement (influencing policy and the state) and a defeat (appropriation). My view is that we need to look beyond this dichotomy to explore the wider significance of the UWOs’ collective action for the reshaping of the labour question.

POSING NEW QUESTIONS

The Piqueteros is a unique and paradigmatic movement, whose experiences allow us to rethink the meaning of the struggles of the unemployed as creative and influential, rather than reactive and defensive. How has the Piquetero movement reframed the labour question in Argentina with regards to working class identity, the nature of unemployment and the problem of the capitalist state?

Real Subsumption and the Experience of Unemployment: Inside, Outside, or a Question of Form?

⁸ A programme called ‘Social Income with Work’ (Ingreso Social con Trabajo), under the umbrella of Argentina Works, has been criticized for being a hybrid scheme that combines ‘social assistance with forced work’ (Lo Vuolo, 2010: 5), and for contradicting the principles of cooperativism by endorsing a ‘co-operativism without co-operatives’ (Bertolini, 2011; for social policy under the Kirchners’ governments see Hintze, 2007).

The first contribution of the Piquetero movement to the reshaping of the labour question is in the representation of the unemployed as a subject of labour and therefore a subject of labour resistance. The Piqueteros challenged the simplistic idea that those who are excluded from the production process can free themselves from work. Rather, they highlighted the distinctive ways in which the real subsumption of labour in capital is experienced in the case of unemployment.

In capitalist societies, work cannot be separated from its form of existence — that is, abstract labour. The most important feature of capitalism is not the insertion of workers into the process of production and the exploitation of their labour power, as the sociology of work argues, but the subordination of workers to the value production process regardless of their position in the labour market. In the capitalism of *real* subsumption, it is abstract and not concrete labour that counts as work, for abstract labour constitutes the substance of value. Abstract labour (value, money) is not simply the socially necessary labour time in a determinate historical period but the form of existence of human activity in capitalist society. Work is not about ‘an individual *contribution* to the total production of society made up of countless individual activities’, as Gorz (1982: 71) proposes. It is exactly the opposite: it is about the abstraction of concrete work into abstract labour and the consequent subordination of people’s activities to the process of valorization of capital, regardless their concrete work. Those ‘individual activities’ matter to workers in terms of their vocation, occupation, profession, skills — but not to capital. Abstract labour entails *indifference* towards the experience of workers and the expansion of such indifference in the form of value and money (Cleverly, 2002: 141).

At this stage in the development of capitalism, there is a real rather than a formal subsumption of workers in capital. The idea that work can be separated from labour relies on the formal subsumption of labour in the process of valorization of capital. While in formal subsumption there is a ‘*direct* subordination of the labour process to capital’ (Marx, 1990: 1034), in real subsumption the process of production and circulation ‘takes the form of the *productive power of capital*’ and no longer appears ‘as the productive power of labour’ (ibid.: 1024; italics in the original) In this arrangement, labour has no independent existence outside the existence of the capital relation but is ‘subsumed’ in capital. Workers might have their preferences but capital’s expansion means the expansion of indifference to any kind of work. This is important because labour identity is created within the process of subsumption of labour in capital, even if it is ‘excluded’ from labour or the production process. As the case of Argentina shows, unemployment does not indicate the creation of a subject that can be

liberated from work. It is rather the opposite: under certain circumstances there can be the creation of ‘invisible’ labour subjectivity *from within* the process of valorization of capital. The experience of the Piqueteros/unemployed workers is important precisely because it takes place within and not outside the process of valorization of capital. By ‘experience’, I do not mean passivity and acceptance of the situation of unemployment and the status quo but what Bonefeld et al. (1995: 3) call ‘opposition and resistance against inhuman conditions which are the reality of capitalist relations of exploitation’.

My argument is that, if the lack of ‘employment’ does not destroy the possibility of subsumption of the unemployed in capital, unemployment is then a *form* of capitalist work rather than a *lack* of capitalist work (see Dinerstein 2002) This ‘form of capitalist work’ has a peculiar feature: it is a case of real subsumption of the unemployed in capital which does not lead to the reproduction of workers but indicates the impossibility of reproduction of life, unless the state intervenes in the decommodification of labour via social security and welfare policy. The unemployed constitute a ‘disposable industrial reserve army’ and ‘surplus population’ (Marx, 1990: 784; 1993: 609) the formation of which, as Marx highlights, is an intrinsic feature of capitalist social relations of production: ‘the capitalist mode of production...forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost...it creates a mass of human material always ready for exploitation by capital in the interest of capital’s own changing valorisation requirements’ (Marx, 1990: 784). This technical term ‘surplus population’ refers to a surplus of labour capacity still subordinated to the value-creating logic. The reserve army is not excluded from anywhere but is defined by capital as temporarily superfluous (Marx 1993: 608–9) and located outside a real illusion of the labour ‘market’. Marx’s observations are confirmed by the concrete experience of the unemployed at the present time: unemployment is experienced as a social epidemic whose symptoms are a feeling of social helplessness, of abandonment, of ‘exclusion’ (Dinerstein 2002).

This analysis takes us directly to the conclusion that while the unemployed are part of the working class, in organizational terms they have little capacity to organize without the help of the party and trade unions. For Marx, the notion of exclusion is utterly disempowering. ‘In unemployment, workers witness their own disappearance only to reappear in the public discourse, academia and policy as new “social” personas such as the swindler, the cheat, the beggar, the unemployed, the starving, the destitute and the criminal working man... figures which exist ... only...for the eyes of doctors, judges, grave-diggers’ (Marx, 1992: 335) — or, in more recent terminology, as ‘the precariat’ (Standing, 2011).

If the sociological accounts of work and unemployment based on the dichotomy of inclusion or exclusion are abandoned, moving onto a conversation about the dynamics leading to the formation of the subjectivity of labour within the process of valorization of capital, it is possible to appreciate that unemployment has the potential to create a subjectivity that emanates from the paradox which arises between the *intensification* of real subsumption (the unemployed are wage labour temporarily suspended) and the phenomenological experience of 'exclusion'. This potential is increased by the absences of appropriate policies able to decommodify labour. However, this is an invisible form of subjectivity of labour, for it is invisible to the eyes of social scientists. Its visibilization requires a political effort to theorize unemployment in a way that empowers the unemployed critical effort. For example, if we consider unemployment as a *form of*, rather than a lack of capitalist work, unemployment becomes a space for the reinvention of labour identity and resistance.

Territories of Hope

The second way in which the Piqueteros have contributed to reshaping the labour question has been by articulating a wider conceptualization of work, as dignified work that moves away from the traditional division between work and labour, and engages rather with the possibility of conceiving work as a wider social activity by a multiplicity of actors.

The neoliberal global transformation of work produced an analytical disentanglement of three categories: labour (a value-producing self-mediating activity), work (a human social activity) and working class identity (the subjectivity of labour). In *Farewell to the Working Class*, Gorz (1982) proposes that work must be separated from its commodified form of existence. He suggests that the crisis of the proletariat means that the polyvalent skilled worker has disappeared and the 'class able to take charge of the socialist project' has disappeared along with it (Gorz, 1982: 67); he announces that 'in place of the productive collective worker... a non class of non workers is coming to being, prefiguring a non society within existing society in which classes will be abolished along with work and all forms of domination' (ibid.). Like Gorz, in order to rescue human activity from the jaws of capital, Standing (2009: 6, 7) makes the distinction between work and labour. Work, he writes, 'captures the activities of necessity, surviving and reproducing, *and* personal development'; 'labour's function is to produce marketable

outputs or services. Those who control labour usually want to take advantage of others, and often will oppress and exploit those performing labour’.

In Latin America, where work is precarious and social security regimes are fragmented (Lo Vuolo, 2013), and where the experience of unemployment is one of high levels of hardship and deprivation, the meaning of ‘work’ is wide and exceeds formal employment by wage labour. There is a history of radical mobilization at the grassroots and involvement in collective actions aimed at reinventing work, social justice and solidarity by means of alternative forms of economic and work relations forged at community level (Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005: 2044). These endeavours — also called ‘community economy’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006), ‘social and solidarity economy’ and ‘social economy’ (Coraggio, 1999; 2011)— are concrete utopias.

Within the heterogeneous spaces delineated in the neighbourhoods, cooperatives and communal projects, the UWOs recreated the alleged unique functions of capitalist work. This supports Cole’s critique of Jahoda et al., as the latter proposed that paid work is irreplaceable in providing for five human needs: ‘shared experience, a structured experience of time, collective purpose, status and identity, required regular activity’ (Cole, 2007: 1134). But not only these: in the Piqueteros’ demarcated territories, alternative forms of sociability, social relations and solidarities, caring practices, learning processes, and emancipatory horizons were fashioned. These territories are what Lefebvre refers to as ‘heterotopic places’ (Lefebvre, 1974/1991: 292): ‘liminal spaces of possibility where “something different” is not only possible, but foundational for the defining of revolutionary trajectories. This “something different” does not necessarily arise out of a conscious plane, but more simply out of what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their daily lives’ (Harvey, 2012: xviii). This denotes the possibility of conceiving the ‘socially excluded’ as capable of engaging in a concrete utopia of a dignified life rather than regarding them as dependent of the politics of other groups, the state and business (Dinerstein, 2014a). This also indicates that it is possible to embrace a wider concept of work that moves from a narrow definition to an encompassing activity that can create a better society. For example, Holloway (2002, 2010) offers the term *doing* to designate the activity of ‘work’ that is the ‘practical negativity’ that ‘negates an existing state of affairs ... goes beyond, transcends’ (Holloway, 2002: 23). Doing, therefore, is the human practice that is constantly subordinated to abstract labour, value, money (Holloway, 2010)

Autonomy, Unemployment and the Capitalist State: On Good and Bad Utopias

The third way in which the Piqueteros reshaped the labour question is by in their autonomy in relation to the state. Gorz has proposed that we need to move onto other forms of ‘work’, not subordinated to abstract labour; (Levitas, 2001: 460) advocates that the ‘discontinuity in the wage society must be sustained by the state through basic income’. Likewise, Standing (2013) argues that current social security systems are not up to the big problem facing us, for ‘anger is spreading, social unrest will follow’. He advocates a fundamental reform in social security through the implementation of ‘unconditional basic income on which to survive in dignity’, beyond wage-based society (Gorz, 1999: 73). He is concerned with providing support to the unemployed and other vulnerable workers, which will prevent them from contributing to social unrest with unforeseeable consequences. The campaign for universal basic income (UBI) is gaining adherents. Cole (2007, 2008), Levitas (2001) and Weeks (2011) have also used ‘basic income’ to problematize ‘paid work’ and as an example of post-work utopia and the need to orient critical social policy towards the creation of alternatives to the present situation.

I have three concerns. The first (minor) concern is about the style in which the UBI proposal is presented by some scholars: it can sometimes read like a holiday advertisement. While Gorz claims we might ‘work less live more’ and believes that the future lies in the reduction of working hours (1982: 137), Standing (2013) suggests ‘less labor, more self-chosen work and more real leisure! Basic income would help achieve this’. The critique of paid work and the creation of anti/post-work imaginaries must be welcomed, but this trivialization of the drama of unemployment and the predicaments that capitalist work brings to both the unemployed and those in work at this particular conjuncture is alarming.

My other two reservations are more substantial. The first one is theoretical and refers to the notion of the state that underpins the UBI proposal. Gorz defines the state as the ‘sphere of necessity’ (1982: 111), i.e. as the heteronomous space where we can locate the management of necessities in order to become autonomous and free — a neutral institution. In this definition of the state (which is surprising, coming from a socialist), ‘Gorz suggests that nation states need to act collectively rather than competitively to limit flows of capital, and to stop colluding in the fiction that globalisation is a natural process. This, however, is simply a transitional demand. The kind of society envisaged by Gorz... is incompatible with capitalism’ (Levitas, 2001: 462)

This interpretation of the capitalist state is not reformist but inadequate. The capitalist state is not an ‘institution’ or ‘the sphere of necessity’ or a tool to act collectively, but the political form of capitalist social relations, a mediation that shapes social relations, including the filtering and moulding of the struggles of the working class and the unemployed via politics, policy and the law. The existence of the capitalist state ensures that the society of the free and equal remains a chimera. The state, of course, possesses relative autonomy and can act on behalf of the working class. While the UBI can serve the purpose of poverty alleviation in the short and medium term, in the long run it perpetuates the class society that it aims to obliterate. In addition to this, there is another relevant question: how can we solve the problem of the subordination of human life and praxis to the logic of value, i.e. money, with cash transfers managed by the state? This seems like an irresolvable paradox. Developing the issue is beyond the scope of this contribution: suffice to say that money is not simply a means of exchange but a supreme social power that gives materiality to the ‘ghost’ which is value (Bellofiore, 2009: 185; Bonefeld, 2010). Money, therefore, is not simply an alienated mediation that can be eliminated in order to live a ‘life without money’ (Nelson and Timmerman, 2011). In capitalism, money is a form of existence of human practice (Bonefeld, 1996). It is the material expression of a relation of subordination, or as Negri (1991: 148) puts it: ‘the pure and simple form of politics — of the “essential inessentiality” as the young Marx would say in Hegelian terms’. Social justice is only possible in a world that is not dominated by the command of money over the human, for this would mean not simply the end of exploitation, but the end of the subordination of all human activity to the logic of an abstraction.

The second concern is political and is about the positing of the task of implementing a radical change in the hands of (social-democratic or populist?) political elites. First, Standing (2011) highlights that market flexibility means, in the end, insecurity for workers and their families. In this context, he argues, a new global subject has emerged: ‘a global “precariat”, consisting of many millions around the world without an anchor of stability’ (ibid.: 1). He suggests that in contrast to the traditional industrial working class, the precariat lack ‘collective pride, dignity and identity’ (ibid.: 45). The motivation for the implementation of the UBI is noble, but it is worrying when it comes from fear; in Standing’s case, it seems to emanate from the fear of a ‘dangerous class’ entering an irreversible process of chaotic mobilization, and falling for the call of the far right. As the cases of the Piqueteros and other movements in Latin America demonstrate, it is the mobilization of the unemployed, the landless, the urban poor, and the indigenous that bring some rationality and stability to the

destabilizing chaos, which has been created by neoliberal structural adjustments since the late 1980s and by the ongoing capitalist crisis, rather than by precarious workers. Unemployed workers in Argentina named themselves differently, organized themselves and engaged their communities, networked with other local, national, international and global movements, and attained political influence.

At a moment when many urban and rural working class and their movements (mostly but not exclusively in the global South) are mobilizing from the grassroots against unemployment, as well as extractivism, landlessness, displacement, land grabbing—in other words, ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2005) — Munck is right to argue that ‘the politics of a “dangerous class” discourse is quite simply incompatible with a progressive social transformation politics. It is a politics of social pathology which has no place in a progressive view of history and human potential’ (Munck, 2013: 759). In short, the UBI suffocates, rather than relies on, the development of alternative practicesm which, like the Piqueteros, have emerged in the past two decades not only to contest the reality of neoliberal capitalism but to move *beyond* it.

In light of the self-organizing experience of the Piquetero and many other movements in the South, the proposal of UBIs can be labelled a ‘bad utopia’. The Piqueteros’ organizing for social transformation illustrates that the dream of dignified work and dignified life cannot be left in the hands of the capitalist state, but at the same time, the state performs as a mediation in the process of attaining dignified work. The radicality of the Piqueteros’ collective action does not rest on their demands to the state but in the artful way that they navigated the tensions arising from the processing of these demands with, against, despite and beyond the state (Böhm et al, 2010; Dinerstein, 2010), and in their use of these tensions to benefit the autonomous development of dignified work at the grassroots.

It is worth making the point that dignified work is not the same as decent work (Ghiotto and Pascual, 2010) advocated by the government of Argentina and promoted by the ILO. While the former is a concrete utopia (Bloch, 1959/1986) crafted in the Piqueteros’ territories of hope, the latter indicates an upgrading within the wrong society: ‘Decent work is defined by the ILO as employment in conditions of freedom, equity, human security and dignity [but] how could globalisation be given a “human face”?’ (Munck, 2013: 757–8). Although (some) policy is appreciated, to many of the Piquetero organizations, and to labour and social movements, dignified work cannot be achieved by policy or decree, but needs to be fought over within, despite, against and beyond the state’s attempts at humanizing capitalism. The meanings attributed to dignity and dignified work varies depending on the

UWOs' political project and alliances with trade unions, social activists and the political left (Dinerstein, 2014b). Most of the UWOs, however, agree that the pursuit of dignity requires a fundamental critique not only of unemployment, but of capitalist work altogether, and of the social relations which reproduce and expand it. Members of the MTD Solano (a radical autonomous grouping of the UWO spectrum) define their collective actions not as 'working class struggles for social reforms or for a future revolution, in the strict sense, but as a praxis projected into the future and, therefore, able to anticipate alternative realities to the present one: , the reality of "dignity"' (MTD Solano and Colectivo Situaciones, 2002: 70).

CONCLUSION

Social enquiry is produced within the materiality of the social relations that contextualize emerging social, economic and political concerns. We have moved away from the debate that was structured around the question of whether 'work is still a central issue' (Cleaver, 2002) triggered by labour radical resistance, the consequent attack on and global transformation of labour, and the crisis of class relations it produced. We have learnt that global society does not depend less on capitalist work than it did fifty years ago but more. Capitalist work continues to be the organizing principle of all aspects of social life in capitalism (Dinerstein and Neary, 2002: 1). But the labour question is constantly reshaped, as the forms of capital accumulation, the law and the institutions of the state change.

In this contribution, I explored three transformations advanced by the Piquetero movement that contested the idea that the struggles of the unemployed are defensive and reactive. I pointed to three ways in which the collective actions of the unemployed workers in Argentina have shaped the labour question. The Piqueteros is of course a paradigmatic case, and constitutes one among many movements that are difficult to pin down, for they pose too many challenges to the classifications of Western academia and traditional forms of working class organization. Elsewhere, we have offered the term 'hope movements' (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012) to name a type of movement that is at present engaging with a new imaginary signification of work and social interaction.

As a hope movement, the Piqueteros did not simply demand job creation, security and inclusion: they also put forward a critique of neoliberalism and one of its most deplorable outcomes, mass unemployment. In so doing, they articulated a 'utopian demand' for dignified work. Weeks (2011: 176) defines a utopian demand as 'a political demand that takes the form

not of a narrowly pragmatic reform but a more substantial transformation of the present configuration of social relations'. The political significance of the Piqueteros also goes beyond Argentina and Latin America. Their 'local' projects are part of a network of worldwide resistance and the formation of a new labour internationalism (Costa, 2006; Lambert and Webster, 2006; Munck, 2000; Munck and Waterman, 1999). However imperfectly, they are contributing to the global critique of capitalism as an impossible form of human society (Dinerstein and Neary, 2002).

The Piquetero movement challenges Standing's idea of the precariat as a dangerous class. Rather, by negating the 'precariat condition', it stands against the particular form of exploitation and subordination of workers entailed in unemployment. The unemployed are *endangered* workers, particularly in the global South. In Argentina, unemployed workers rejected the idea of becoming the victims of the neoliberal dismantling of hope, organized themselves (practically without labour organizations) and developed alternative realities to that of exclusion and vulnerability. They opened a space for the articulation of concrete utopias (collective dreams) that re-signified the meaning and experience of *work* in various ways that associated work with dignity and solidarity. This is especially noteworthy coming from an actor allegedly incapable of engaging in any collective action: the unemployed.

The Piqueteros' enterprise has not been perfect, but it has been both effective and inspiring. Sociology of work and employment and policy sciences would need to engage with the concrete utopias that have emerged out of the neoliberal dismantling of labour solidarity, in order to discover the real debate about work and labour that is taking place invisibly at the grassroots, in the neighbourhoods, settlements, cities, rainforests and countryside of the global South, and elsewhere. These are invaluable sources of knowledge and experience for those who are dedicated to rethinking work and the labour question in the twenty-first century.

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