

Precarity, Care, and Popular Economy in Latin America

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Summary

The notions of precarity and care have become increasingly central in academic debate. Although both notions have a history dating back to the 1970s, the debates over them have undoubtedly been renewed since the world economic crisis that emerged in 2008. Both concepts have been subject to various reviews according to different disciplinary views and contexts of knowledge production. However, it is possible to identify some points in common across the different lines of analysis that come into play in both cases. From a social and historically situated perspective, the understanding of precarity as an experience that goes beyond what is strictly labor-related has made it possible to bring visibility to the living conditions of a large sector of the population worldwide. By putting on hold views of work based on a formal/informal dichotomy, attention to non-European realities has opened the way to questions and reflections that have led to a rethinking of the ways in which work and the economy are understood, and to consideration of the ways in which individual and collective strategies are generated for the reproduction of life under unwaged and even non-commodified forms of labor. The concept of care, particularly as developed by feminist economics, has also aimed to problematize economic systems which are centered on a self-sufficient ideal subject who meets their vital needs only through the market, and which evidence hierarchies of gender and class that come into play in the valorization and distribution of work.

In Latin America, the recent development of a series of unionization and mobilization processes led by workers from the popular economy has meant a revisiting of the debates about the various forms of reproduction of life in populations structurally excluded from wage labor. In recent years, in Argentina in particular, a series of collective organization processes led by unwaged workers has taken place with the aim of claiming rights and improving living conditions for sectors of the population defined as part of the popular economy. The ethnographic analysis of these experiences sheds light on the intersection between precarity and care, contributing to broader questions about ways of making a living and producing well-being in contexts of structural inequality and exclusion from the formal labor market. The dynamics of organization produced by the popular economy entail the implementation of collective forms of care and reproduction of life that stretch the limits of the Fordist model of welfare provision anchored in the labor market and in the nuclear family, thus renewing debates around the ways in which processes of class struggle are configured.

Keywords: popular economy, care, precarity, Latin America, making a living, labor, collective organization process, Argentina

Subjects: Sociocultural Anthropology

Introduction

In this article, we seek to contribute to a discussion of the relationship between precarity and care on the basis of debates carried out in Latin America. These highlight how central collective dynamics have been in the production and reproduction of life in the region, particularly for sectors of the population that have historically been excluded from wage labor. The concept of popular economy as a critical perspective on the ideas of informality and marginality, as well as the contributions of feminist studies that have highlighted the centrality of collective care, have renewed the debates on ways of making a living in popular sectors. In the first section, “From Precarity to Popular Economy,” we discuss the notion of precarity, framing it in a tradition that dates back to the 1970s in relation to debates on informality and marginality. We focus on contributions made to the notion of popular economy, which challenged the terms of debates developed in Latin America in the 1980s. In the second section, “Care as a Collective Practice: Contributions from Latin America,” we revisit the contributions on care made by anthropology and feminist economics, pointing out that they are inscribed in a series of reflections on the conditions of sustainability of life and forms of reproduction beyond the nuclear family. In the third section, “Popular Economy, Collective Organization, and Reproduction of Life in Argentina,” we focus on a series of organizational processes led by workers from the popular economy in Argentina in the last decade. These processes shed light on substantive aspects of the intersection of the debates on precarity and care. Based on a series of ethnographic scenes, we analyze the ways in which this political construction challenges both the dynamics of the labor market and the role of the nuclear family in the construction of collective well-being. We show how access to labor rights—such as the possibility of having healthcare and retirement benefits, among others—is articulated in conjunction with collective care practices that transcend a restrictive view of labor to include a broader set of living conditions in neighborhoods and households.

From Precarity to Popular Economy

In recent years, the notion of precarity has become increasingly relevant in the social sciences as a means to characterize the living conditions of growing populations in contemporary capitalism in both the global North and the global South. These studies have contributed to broadening the scope of the notion of precarity from that which had prevailed in the sociology of labor, where this category was mainly used to refer to modalities of degraded work as opposed to wage labor. This broad perspective on precarity became central in the anthropological literature as a reflection on living conditions and the language or projects of political organization (Allison 2013; Millar 2014; Molé 2010; Das and Randeria 2015; Casas-Cortés 2014; Ferguson 2015).

On the one hand, based on the distinction between precariousness and precarity, the work of Butler (2004) opened a path to an ontological investigation of precariousness as a human condition of vulnerability derived from the fact of being dependent on one another. In contrast, precarity is linked to a differential experience related to the forms of inequality and violence suffered by certain population groups in situations of socioeconomic marginalization or social

suffering. Even at the risk of blurring the specific meaning of the term, this perspective has nourished a series of ethnographic studies that look at labor precarity as an ontological experience (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Mole 2010; Allison 2013; Millar 2014; Muehlebach 2011). Thus, these studies contributed to a reading that enriched the analysis of labor regimes and structural processes by considering subjectivity, emotions, and affection (Millar 2017; Kasmir 2018).

On the other hand, Standing (2011) developed a provocative and widely discussed analysis of the *precariat* as a dangerous new class. According to Standing, the qualification of *dangerous* attributed to the precariat stems from the group's lack of an occupational identity and, consequently, the lack of collective forms of solidarity built on shared codes and ties. Various authors have pointed out the ethnocentric and ahistorical character of this reading, a critique that can be extended in a broader sense to reflections on the notion of precarity present in contemporary discussions (Munck 2013; Breman 2013; Ferguson 2015). Numerous anthropological studies warn us that, far from being an exception or a characteristic of the labor dynamics specific to neoliberal capitalism, precarity has rather been the norm in the development of capitalism generally. In effect, for large groups of the population defined as "poor" or "popular sectors," far from constituting a discontinuity with a stable and protected past, precarity has been a structural condition that models forms of life, including expectations and visions or projects for the future (de L'Estoile 2014). Hence the need to situate, in historical and social terms, the analysis of how the experience of precarity models the development of individual and collective strategies (Millar 2014; Kasmir 2018; Sanchez 2018).

Here, emphasis has been placed on the need to understand the forms that precarity takes as an expression of the mutuality of class relations as part of the logic of accumulation by dispossession (in the terms proposed by David Harvey 2003), as a way to transcend dichotomies such as "global South/North," "formal/informal," "poor/working class," or "lumpenproletarian/proletarian" (Carbonella and Kasmir 2015). From this perspective, the potential of the category is that of drawing attention to the continuous process of differentiation of the working class through time and space beyond a wage-centered perspective, as it assumes that there is a process of convergence of working lives on a global level (Kasmir 2018). A fundamental concern is that of inscribing the analysis of the experience of precarity as part of class relations and struggles by considering the way forms of solidarity, resistance, and struggle are built, as well as the dynamics that contest or limit it (Lazar and Sánchez 2019; Smith 2019).

Advancing in a historically and socially situated analysis of precarity requires, as Munck (2013) indicated, considering this notion in relation to earlier concepts such as marginality and informality. These concepts became particularly relevant in the Latin American context to explain the ways in which large sectors of the population outside the labor market make their living. While the second notion was developed by anthropology and spread through the work of Hart (1973), the first was coined in Latin America by authors such as Germani (1973), Quijano (1974), and Nun (1971).

Popularized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in a context where modernization theories prevailed, the development of the concept of informal economy is attributed to the study conducted by Hart (1973) to explain the reality of employment in Accra, where large sectors of the population generated their income outside the formal sector of the economy. The characterization produced by the English anthropologist in the early 1970s emphasized the heterogeneity of this sector, whose commonalities included family ownership, small-scale activities, and low-capital investment. Although it was based on a Weberian reading that placed the focus on rational-legal forms and did not question the formal/informal dichotomy, Hart's study pointed out the interconnected character of both sectors of the economy as well as the importance of social networks sustained by ties of kinship or friendship (Cortado 2014). The work carried out in parallel and in the same year by Brazilian anthropologist Machado da Silva (1971) on the labor market in his country's metropolises is less well known. His study leads to an analysis close to that developed by Hart with regard to both the interconnected nature of the economy and the centrality of the ties of kinship and friendship that underpin informal work (Rabossi 2019). However, in the Latin American context, the most widespread notion of informality was the view developed by the Regional Employment Program for Latin America and the Caribbean (PREALC), the ILO office on the continent, within which the work of Victor Tokman (1987) and Portes (1984) stood out (Bergesio 2004; Rabossi 2019).

In contrast, the concepts of marginal mass (*masa marginal*) and marginal pole (*polo marginal*) developed in the same context by Nun (1971) and Quijano (1974), respectively, were based on the notions of a reserve army and relative overpopulation developed by Karl Marx. They sought an explanation based on this perspective for the specificity of the labor market in the Latin American region, which was characterized by a dependent economy. The analysis of Nun (1971) and Quijano (1974) drew on the structural and relational approach that the dependency theory proposed for the analysis of development. They also emphasized the role of this population, defined as marginal, in disciplining the proletariat.¹ Instead of focusing on the institutionality of this sector of the economy, these approaches proposed a critical look at its role in the process of accumulation in these countries, although without questioning the dual character of the economy (Serra 2018). For Latin American anthropology in particular, Larissa Adler de Lomnitz's celebrated work, *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown* (1977), constituted an essential reference. There, the author highlighted the centrality of the networks of reciprocity and mutual aid penetrated by relationships of kinship, friendship, neighborly relations, and *compadrazgo* (fictive kinship or godparenthood) in the survival strategies of the slums in Mexico City. Even though the notion of marginality was widely discussed in later anthropological studies, this pioneering work opened an extremely prolific path in the study of the forms of reproduction of popular sectors in the region.²

Since the 1980s, a group of authors, among whom Razeto (1983), Coraggio (1992), and Núñez (1995) stand out, have proposed an alternative to the notions of marginality and informality that has been less explored in the Anglophone literature. These authors coined the concept of popular economy to answer the same question about the forms of reproduction of urban sectors of the population that were not incorporated into the formal labor market. This category arises from the work that the authors carried out with grassroots organizations with a strong local presence, in

particular social organizations linked to liberation theology (Serra, 2018).³ Thus, unlike terms such as informality or marginality, which start from the perspective of the individual and their relationship to the labor market, the notion of popular economy underlines the importance of collective organizations and practices of mutual aid in the reproduction of the life of the popular classes in contexts of neoliberal adjustment. From this perspective, the popular economy is seen as an alternative path or project to that of neoliberalism—and, in a broader sense, to the logic of capital accumulation. Hence, the authors emphasize the solidarity aspect of the popular economy as an intrinsic logic, and as opposed to commercial practices, in a reflection that recovers the Maussian notion of gift. By emphasizing this aspect, they gave the the idea of the popular economy priority over other ideas such as that of the social economy.

However, in recent years, the term popular economy has gained vitality in both the processes of political organization and the literature developed in Latin America, a development that highlights the way in which popular economy is part of broader dynamics of capitalist accumulation (Gago 2018; Giraldo 2017; Roig 2017; Gago, Cielo, and Gachet 2018; Fernández Álvarez 2018, 2019; Señorans 2020). Recent studies question the traditional ways of approaching the practices, relationships, and dynamics that define the ways of making a living among these populations. They also critically address available categories such as informality, exclusion, marginality, survival, and even precarity.

This connection between popular economies and processes of capital accumulation has made it possible to understand the close connections among the way of life of popular sectors, processes of dispossession, forms of value production, and urbanization processes. This analytical approach is interrelated with a broader tradition in academic debates that aims to question processes of the reproduction of inequality in Latin America, taking into account the incidence of recent processes of global urbanization and marginalization in cities (Holston 2008). The concept of insurgent citizenship, which was coined by Holston and inspired by the research he conducted with popular sectors in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, strongly influenced the thinking around urban marginality. According to Holston, urban marginality can produce forms of subjectivity and alternative forms of citizenship that are based on the demand for the right to a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen's dignity. Holston's contribution made it possible to capture the simultaneous processes of improvement of urban peripheries and the reproduction of inequity and precarity, proposing a study of the peripheries that is situated in time and space and stands at a distance from dualistic oppositions such as legal/illegal, regular/irregular, and formal/informal (Caldeira 2016).

Furthermore, these insights can be considered in relation to a broader discussion, one which has been taking place in anthropology in recent years in the context of the transformations of contemporary capitalism, about the ways in which people produce ways to guarantee what they consider to be a life worth living. In discussing the limits of abstract models, Narotzky and Besnier (2014) propose that we “rethink the economy” in light of the continuities and transformations of the collective systems that allow for the sustaining not only of material life, but also of social, affective, and political life, and more. Their contribution invites us to focus the analysis on the diversity of practices and processes involved in the ways of “making a living” and of building “lives that are worth living” (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). This perspective draws

attention to the importance of considering both the historically and culturally situated nature of the ways of making a living in specific contexts and the relationship between abstract models and everyday practices, which implies affirming the materiality of these models and their effects on large groups in the population. Along these lines, the power of an ethnographic approach lies not only in developing a plural perspective on economic practices but also, and above all, in taking a careful look at the situated forms of building the world and living in it, giving an account of the way other forms of life—rather than another economy—are built (L'Etoile 2014). This implies emphasizing the political, moral, and affective aspects of the daily means of sustaining life, introducing and prioritizing *politics* in the study of the forms of (re)producing life generally associated with “the economy.” This perspective is extremely helpful in broadening the framework of an anthropology of labor that privileges an approach to wage relations—and even to the world of the working class—in order to focus on the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the forms of labor (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008; Kasmir 2020). In effect, the renewal of anthropological reflections on this subject has gone hand in hand with an intention to rethink the concept of labor (Narotzky 2018) in order to broaden our view to include not only non-salaried but also non-commodified forms. As we will show further in the section “Care as a Collective Practice: Contributions from Latin America,” these reflections are enriched by the contributions of feminist perspectives that have been insisting for decades on critical reflection upon the dyad of productive-reproductive work.

Care as a Collective Practice: Contributions from Latin America

As with the discussions regarding precarity, the notion of care has gained prominence in the academic debates of recent decades. A series of historical processes at global level, such as an increase in the employment rate among women, an aging population, and the acceleration of migratory networks, have contributed to the expansion of research on the subject, giving rise to an array of questions and analytical approaches that transcend the boundaries of disciplines as well as national borders. Much of the academic discussion of care emphasizes critical views of conventional economics developed within different feminist perspectives and leading to a broader discussion of the importance of unpaid work and gender relations in the processes that make it possible to sustain human life.

These discussions recover and update claims and conceptualizations developed by Marxist feminists in Europe and the United States, starting in the 1970s, in what later became known as the domestic labor debate. In the heat of the struggles framed by the International Wages for Housework campaign, analyses that problematized restricted visions of the class struggle were developed, pointing out that care, as part of a set of unpaid forms of work, constituted the foundation of industrial exploitation (Federici 2012). The position of women in capitalist societies was analyzed as a specific form of class exploitation (Molyneux 1979; Benería 1979; Himmelweit 1995; Gardiner 1997; Narotzky 2004; Dalla Costa 2006). These contributions notably marked the debates around care, making it possible to highlight the contributions of unpaid work and to bring visibility to the links between this work and the processes of capital accumulation and income expansion. At the same time, these contributions made it possible to consider

reproductive activities in conjunction with productive activities within the same analytical framework (Carrasco 1992; Picchio 1994, 2009). The interest in reviewing the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and the processes of reproduction of the labor force through the lens of gender led to a series of reflections that focused on the affections and relational characteristics of care work, pointing out its specificity relative to other housework (Folbre 1995; England and Folbre 1999) and paving the way for a politicized analysis (Fisher and Tronto 1990). These activities were valued and understood as ways to address the needs created by interdependence and vulnerability as general conditions of human life (Carrasco 2012; Pérez Orozco 2014).

Thus, placing care and livelihood at the center of the analysis means problematizing those views that are based on dividing the population into sectors that are “dependent” and receive care and those that are “autonomous” or “independent” and responsible for providing it (Carrasco 2012 ; Pérez Orozco 2014; Herrero 2013). The construction of analyses and reflections on social life that focus on the ways in which livelihood is sustained and reproduced enables the development of an approach that is central to feminist understandings and that consists of questioning a series of dichotomies that permeate conventional views of economics such as production/reproduction and active/inactive population. The problematization of these dualisms or, as Pérez Orozco (2014) proposes, of the heteropatriarchal epistemology on which the division between production and reproduction is based, led to the identification of the economic and social contributions of care work, ending the invisibility of what was happening inside the home and outside of wage relations.

Feminist studies have opened a path to problematizing the connection between care and the nuclear family, which has been a point of convergence between the contributions of anthropology and those of feminist economics. Meanwhile, anthropology has contributed by exposing the great cultural diversity in the forms and distribution of care work, pointing out the central role of sexuality and kinship in the construction of gender relations (Comas de Argemir 2014). These contributions formed part of a broader attempt, which has been developed since the 1970s, to build models to explain the oppression of women by focusing on the way in which their association with nature (Ortner 1974), motherhood (Chodorow 1974) and the “domestic sphere” (Rosaldo 1974) was socially constructed. Although the use of dichotomies like public/private or productive/reproductive was further problematized in later works (Rosaldo 1995; Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Lamphere 1993), these contributions laid the foundations for the problematization of Western categories of family. They pointed out the moral and ideological implications of the emergence of the nuclear family in relation to the constitution of the modern state and the capitalist market (Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako 1982).

Thus, interesting contributions have been developed that aim to explore normative views of care, straining its association with naturalized meanings of “maternal love” (Palomar Vereá 2005; Tarducci 2011). Ethnographic studies have emphasized the experiential dimension of care, focusing on how it is shaped by everyday relationships and calling attention to links with less observed aspects of life such as sexuality (Molinier 2012; Debert and Brigeiro 2012; Hirata 2016) and mental suffering (Hirata 2016). Thus, the ethnographic approach has made it possible to

situate care as a problem in everyday life rather than as a category with defined borders, showing how it is shaped by moral commitments and intimate relationships of interdependence in contexts of structural social inequalities (Han, 2012)

Meanwhile feminist economics has proposed a series of notions that highlighted the joint participation of the family, the state, the market, and the community in the provision of care. Categories such as “social care” (Daly and Lewis 2000), “care diamond” (Razavi 2007), and “social organization of care” (Faur 2014; Rodriguez Enriquez and Marzonetto 2015) have become central in this respect, drawing on the feminist critique of the male provider/female caregiver model that underlaid the classic conceptions of the welfare state. In Latin America, these concepts—especially that of social organization of care—have been particularly influential, bringing visibility to class and gender inequalities that exist throughout care and reproductive tasks. It has been widely documented that the insufficient public provision of childcare services, the maternalism and familism of social policies, and the high rates of labor informality in Latin America create an asymmetrical scenario that especially affects women from popular sectors, overloading them with domestic and community work and conditioning their insertion in the waged labor market (Rodriguez Enriquez 2007; Pautassi 2007; Sojo 2011; Faur 2014; Martinez Franzoni 2007; Marco Navarro and Rico 2013; Aguirre 2015). The social consequences of the structural adjustment measures and neoliberal policies implemented in various countries during the 1980s and 1990s left their marks on the ways in which this social organization of care was structured, leading to the creation of multiple collective strategies to address food, housing, health, and education needs. Salient features of the ways in which the reproduction of life has been managed in different Latin American countries are the expansion of food aid networks such as soup kitchens and food banks, the community management of spaces for childcare, and processes of collective construction and improvement of housing and neighborhood spaces. Community-based forms of care have played an integral part in the region, especially in contexts of poverty and inequality (Zibecchi 2015; Ierullo and Maglioni 2015; Santillan 2014; Vega and Martinez 2017). In this regard, studies focusing on the experiences of Latin America have pointed out the inequalities between the sectors of the population that can turn to the market for care services and those for whom the reproduction of life depends mostly on family and community arrangements. Specifically in the case of popular sectors, the role of women in reproductive and care work goes beyond the limits of the household and extends to collective networks that develop in neighborhood settings and in connection with political organization processes.

More recently, the debates about care in Latin America have been renewed by mobilization processes such as the struggle against femicide and other expressions of violence, the defense of territories against advanced extractive industries, and demands for the recognition and access to rights of those who carry out unwaged work, which includes both domestic work and initiatives of the popular economy. The importance that mass mobilizations against gender violence and women’s strikes have acquired in recent years has made it possible to place the care and defense of life at the center of these claims (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2018), revaluing links “among women” (Sosa, Menéndez, and Bascuas 2018; Menéndez 2018). These analyses recovered a way of understanding care that includes self-care, the defense of common goods, and community practices, and that gathers the inspiration of contributions already well established within feminist theory, among which the analyses of Federici (2012) on the processes of accumulation

stand out (Cavallero and Gago 2020). Thus, the recent expansion of feminist struggles in Latin America augments and articulates historical demands of the feminist economy as well as experiences and demands of the popular economy in order to challenge the limits of what is understood as work and propose a reading of processes of dispossession and resistance that recovers the politicization of the processes linked to the reproduction of life (Cielo and Vega 2015; Cavallero and Gago 2020).

Popular Economy, Collective Organization, and Reproduction of Life in Argentina

The debates developed in Latin America on the relationship between precarity and care highlight the central role of collective dynamics in the production and reproduction of life in this region, especially for the popular sectors. The notion of popular economy as a critical perspective on the ideas of informality and marginality, as well as feminist studies of the notion of collective care, have contributed to renewing the debates about the different ways of making a living in populations structurally excluded from wage labor. These debates must be understood in light of the increasing development of processes of territorial organization linked to both urbanization processes and to the dynamics of the reconfiguration of the working classes in the context of neoliberal adjustment programs that were implemented in the region from the 1980s onward and which shaped relationships with the state in specific ways. The dynamics of the relationship between popular sectors and state formation in Latin America has been a highly relevant topic in anthropological studies, which point out how state orders and their transformations cannot be understood without considering the dynamics of their relationship with social movements and organizations (Lagos and Calla 2007; Lazar 2008; Barragan and Wanderley 2009; Fernandes 2010; Grimberg, Fernández Álvarez, and Rosa 2009; Manzano 2013). At the same time, these studies have pointed out that the everyday practices of these organizations are interlinked as a result of the collective management of state programs.

The development in Argentina in the last decade of a series of organizational processes led by workers from the popular economy, on which we will focus in this section, sheds light on several substantive aspects of the intersections between precarity and care that contribute to broader questions about the ways of making a living in contexts of structural inequalities and exclusion from the labor market. These processes show the centrality of the relationship to the state in providing material and symbolic resources involved in the production of collective well-being developed by these organizations.

The creation of the Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy, CTEP) in 2011 was an important milestone in these processes. This organization defines itself as a trade union organization with the aim of representing the workers of the “popular economy,” meaning those who, having been left out of the labor market, have had to “invent a job to survive.” “Popular economy” is therefore a political category which seeks to unify a heterogeneous population that some authors have described as “wageless lives” (Denning 2010) and that are generally defined as “informal,” “precarious,” “externalized,” or “subsistence” workers.⁴

The process of formation of this organization as a trade union must be understood in the context of a specific tradition of trade unionism and collective politics in Argentina that differentiates it from other areas in the region (Munck, Gallitelli, and Falcon 1987; Torre 2012). At the same time, the CTEP was formed as a result of a process of convergence of a heterogeneous set of social organizations of a territorial nature that articulate demands for work with broader claims related to the living conditions of popular sectors (housing, healthcare, education, etc.), some of which date back at least to the 1990s, at the height of the so-called neoliberal policies.⁵

In late 2019, following the commitment to building union representation, the CTEP promoted the creation of a broader organization called the Union de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (Union of Workers of the Popular Economy, UTEP), in which other organizations such as Corriente Clasista y Combativa (Classist and Combative Current) and Barrios de Pie (Neighborhoods Standing) converged. Following the structure of a trade union, the CTEP–UTEP has been organized in branches by activity sector and it tries to articulate the common demands and objectives of each sector. It is worth noting that this structure and the definition of these branches presuppose an expanded notion of labor, one which includes both activities aimed at generating economic income and linked to the production and commercialization of goods or services—such as the work of street vendors, street artists, seamstresses, urban waste pickers—and unpaid and community work carried out in the neighborhoods. The latter includes activities such as self-building and maintenance of housing, the management of soup kitchens and other tasks related to childcare, and access to health, sports, and recreational activities, all represented by a branch known as “socio-community.”

As part of this political and union organizing, one of the movements that has become relevant recently is the struggle for a Social Emergency, Food, and Popular Economy Organizations Law. Among its proposals, the Law considers the creation of a Supplementary Social Wage, a “state allowance” for “informal” workers or those whose income is below the minimum wage. This direct cash transfer is considered a “supplement” in addition to the income derived from carrying out an individual activities, and it is defined as a “wage,” hence emphasizing the condition of those workers who are part of the popular economy. The implementation, starting in 2017, of the Supplementary Social Wage made it possible to expand the scope and actions of the different branches that make up the CTEP, incorporating new members in the productive units, multiplying soup kitchens, housing renovation tasks, and recreational and training proposals (Fernández Álvarez 2020). These initiatives are articulated based on the long history of many of the organizations within the CTEP–UTEP in the management of social programs and in the creation of work initiatives within the framework of state policies.



Figure 1. Representative of a street vendors' cooperative opening the public presentation of the Branch of Public Space Workers.

Source: María Inés Fernández Álvarez.

As has been pointed out in other research, the organizations of the popular economy are implementing a trade union strategy not only at claiming labor rights and achieving better working conditions but also at collectively creating conditions for the (re)production of life. They develop organizational frameworks to meet the needs of housing, food, health care, and childcare, and they expand what is understood by work (Fernández Álvarez 2018, 2019; Pacífico 2019; Fernández Álvarez et al. 2019; Señorans 2020). By paying ethnographic attention to these processes of collective organization and claims related to ways of making a living, it is possible to move away from a view of the working class as a preexisting phenomenon and toward an observation of how it is constructed in multiple ways, thus constituting a political language in which the “popular” is not a universe separated from the world of work (Fernández Álvarez and Wolanski 2020). Based on these reflections, we will describe two situations from field work with the Branch of Public Space Workers in the CTEP–UTEPA (hereinafter “the Branch”), which groups street vendors, public transport vendors, mass events and fairs vendors, and street artists (see figure 1). Through these two ethnographic scenes, we aim to show the ways in which the demand for access to rights and the collective creation of improvements in the living conditions of workers in the popular economy question classic models of welfare provision anchored in formal work. The ethnographic vignettes show how entanglements and articulations of unwaged labor, collective care, and state resources combine to make life possible.

The first ethnographic scene took place in July 2018 as part of the public presentation following the formation of the Branch. At the opening of the event, the first speaker was a representative of one of the cooperatives formed by vendors who work on one of the intercity passenger train lines in Buenos Aires. After announcing the objective of the meeting and sharing that he had been making his living on the train since he was a child, he raised his hand to show the healthcare card he had received that afternoon. With tears in his eyes, he said that it was the first time in his life that he had access to this right. He explained how important it was to him and his family because his wife was seriously ill and urgently needed to be hospitalized. He then spoke of the importance of this benefit that they were passing on to future generations and stressed that this was a right that the “old” vendors had been deprived of all their lives (see figure 2). The speaker’s life experience resonated with the personal and family stories of the hundreds of vendors present at the event. That day, they had ended their workday earlier than usual and their income would therefore be lower. Despite that, they had joined the event, convinced of the importance of organizing themselves in a context where street vending is a way of making a living that has been systematically threatened as a result of policies of expulsion and direct repression implemented in recent years.⁶

After this speech, Silvia took the floor. She is a leader of another cooperative formed by vendors who work on another intercity line in Buenos Aires. She is also one of the political leaders of the Branch. Silvia reinforced the importance of starting an organizational process to improve living conditions, referring to the experience of having seen the older vendors die while still working on the train. They were never able to access healthcare or retirement benefits. She said that she had started working on the train at the age of seven and, like many of those present, as a child she had endured recurrent situations of systematic violence and police persecution in order to work. She recalled the times she had been detained, sharing with her audience the causes the security forces had fabricated to deprive vendors of their liberty and how difficult it had been to resist in order “not to disappear from the train” in the 1990s during the process of railroad privatization. Silvia’s story also included references to the pride she felt in being a *busca*⁷ and highlighted vendors’ ability to raise money through a collection or a fundraising day when a colleague was sick or had a problem with their housing.

As the testimonies presented during the assembly demonstrated, carrying out a process of union organization as workers in the popular economy was of vital importance because it allowed them to obtain labor rights that had been denied them until then—rights such as sick leave, health care, paid vacations, and retirement. In addition, in Silvia’s account, organizing to “improve their living conditions” not only encompassed working conditions or the importance of enjoying social protection measures derived from participation in the labor market but also emphasized the importance of conquering forms of oppression in the face of a life marked by police violence, as well as the possibility of improving housing conditions and overcoming unexpected problems such as accidents, illnesses, and more.

In sum, Silvia’s speech centered on a longstanding experience of precarity that, as has been pointed out by different contributions within the anthropological literature, does not only refer to a position in the labor market but also permeates more generally the conditions and trajectories

of life. It was an embodied experience that extended to her colleagues at the assembly, leading to a process of collective organization to produce what they consider a life worth living both for themselves and for future generations.



Figure 2. Street vendor showing his healthcare card.

Source: María Inés Fernández Álvarez.

With the second vignette, we move to the neighborhood where Silvia lives, the surroundings of her house, and her relationships with other vendors who live nearby. One morning in April 2017, she knocked on the door of a nearby house and told a neighbor that she had “good news for her family.” Without much ado, she said she had obtained a place for her husband in a cooperative created with a cash transfer program.⁸ Her neighbor had a long history as a street vendor on the train and had been attending the Branch’s meetings and assemblies. By entering the state program, the family would have a monetary income that supplemented what the household was earning through street vending, which was barely enough to feed the couple’s eleven children. Just a few months after that morning, and after the husband’s having joined the cooperative, its members spent a few days working to repair the house of this family of vendors, plastering the walls inside (see figure 3). These housing renovation days occurred within the framework of work services required by the programs, and the members of these programs valued them as useful and productive tasks that contributed to improving their own lives and those of their neighbors (Pacífico 2020). While drinking *mate* (a caffeine-rich infused drink), the homeowner commented that the repairs would improve the insulation and allow them to have a more comfortable winter.

She also enthusiastically showed us a recently purchased oven and, among the morning's comments, the members of the cooperative exchanged recommendations on purchasing building materials and how to apply for financial aid and loans for this purpose.

Silvia took some time to explain to those present how to carry out the necessary steps to plaster a wall. As she had done on other occasions, she emphatically pointed out how important those finishing details were to a better life. She illustrated her words by recalling the transformation of her own house, which had also originally been built with metal and wood. Silvia commented that, in her case, the recent extensions she had managed to build on her house allowed her to have a room for each of her children, which contributed to everyone "living better" and made living together more comfortable. In Silvia's story, the needs of her family and the way of living in spaces traditionally defined as "domestic" or "private" were not separate phenomena from her struggle for labor rights for those who work as street vendors.

Photos illustrating the transformation of *casillas* (shacks) into "dignified housing" were often displayed on social networks, with texts presenting access to a "dignified house" as part of the process of struggle vendors promoted as workers in the popular economy. In addition to holding these construction days, the members of the *Cooperativa de Vendedores Unidos del Tren San Martín* (Cooperative of United Vendors of the San Martín Train) also managed soup kitchens and food banks in their neighborhoods, planned festivals for children and other recreational activities, and provided Christmas baskets to their members.

The forms of collective organization discussed here transcend demands for working conditions in the strict sense of the term, bringing space and living conditions to the forefront. The construction of the aforementioned improvements in living conditions was carried out using links that transcended the nuclear family and involved collective practices of care in the neighborhoods. In this way, the creation of union organization dynamics by workers in the popular economy confirms the productivity of thinking critically about those economic models that presuppose the existence of autonomous and self-sufficient subjects or isolated domestic units. With the development of collective care practices, the boundaries between the productive and the reproductive were challenged, placing value on the contribution made by community work, often feminized, which is carried out in homes and neighborhood spaces.



Figure 3. Silvia working on renovation of a cooperative member's house.

Source: Florencia Daniela Pacifico.

In sum, both scenes demonstrate the limitations of thinking about ways to make a living based on a model anchored solely in the participation of the economically active population in the labor market. Far from being resolved “behind closed doors,” both the recognition of labor rights for workers in the popular economy and the obtaining of the necessary resources to be able to live a life worth living in workers’ homes require a collective approach if people are to intervene politically and generate strategies.

Final Remarks

The recent discussions on precarity and care on the basis of the reflections developed in Latin America highlight the importance of a broad view of what is understood by labor and a willingness to question the ways in which life is sustained. Both perspectives identify the Eurocentric and androcentric bias of the welfare model anchored in wage labor and the formal labor market. The ideal of access to rights through formal work is insufficient if one is to understand and address the lives of groups of the population who have been structurally left out of wage labor and who either have developed activities commonly defined as “informal,” “marginal,” and “for survival” or perform domestic, unpaid, and community work. On the one hand, far from positing precarity as a specific characteristic of the current dynamics of capitalism, a series of studies have highlighted that, in the global South, the condition of wage

earner never became the norm and that a large part of the population sustains their livelihood outside the condition of wage earners. On the other hand, studies of care have developed an analysis of this model of welfare that focuses on gender relations, drawing attention to the dynamics of exploitation and inequality that the male provider/female caregiver model brought to the latter. As evidenced by the struggles and demands built around the idea of the popular economy, the situation of large sectors of the population who are outside formal wage labor shows the importance of a historically and socially situated analysis of the multiplicity of ways in which class relations are expressed. The category of “popular economy,” by claiming the status of workers for those who “invent work” outside the formal labor market, proposes a look at how lives that are worth living are produced in ways which transcend the limits separating productive and reproductive, formal and informal, commodified and non-commodified work. Such a view also makes it possible to question the association between care and the nuclear family, highlighting the range of work that is necessary to sustain life.

As has been widely documented by literature in the social sciences and especially in anthropology, in Latin America there is a strong tendency to create practices and daily arrangements that sustain life outside the labor market through collective and community dynamics. An ethnographic look at these processes shows that the reproduction of the life of workers in the popular economy depends on the coordination of activities conventionally defined as “labor”—in this case, street vending—with other community work carried out in neighborhoods, circulation of aid among households and members of the same organization, the collective creation of strategies to access healthcare, etc. Such coordination strains the limits of the Fordist model of welfare provision, linking access to labor rights with other strategies aimed at improving living conditions in households and neighborhoods. The possibility of developing and promoting collective forms of struggle to improve lives in broad terms is anchored in the sharing of life trajectories penetrated by an embodied experience of structural precarity, turning this experience into a basis for building political organization. These processes of collective organization demonstrate the importance of rethinking dualistic views that classify the population as either formal or informal workers, active or inactive population, autonomous or dependent people. They insist on the importance of attending to a historically and socially situated view of the ways in which the processes of class struggle are currently configured in light of local traditions and specific contexts.

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Notes

1. The dependency theory emerged at the end of the 1960s and challenged the modernizing views on development, arguing that Latin America's position as a supplier of raw materials generated a condition of dependency on the central countries, conditioning the peripheral countries and generating processes of "structural underdevelopment" (Gunder Frank 1967).
2. In this direction, the works of Gutierrez (2004); Eguía and Ortale (2004); and Gonzales de la Rocha (2004) may be consulted. As we pointed out elsewhere (Fernandez Alvarez and Perelman 2020), notions of strategy (of life, survival, adaptation, and social reproduction) have deepened these reflections, and to these we must add the notion of accumulation of disadvantages developed by Gonzales de la Rocha (2004), which constitutes another relevant contribution. Cf. Saraví (2007) for a reflection on studies in different Latin American countries.
3. Liberation theology consisted of an attempt to modernize theology that incorporated, among its sources of study, the analysis of the Bible and the contributions of the social sciences; consequently, it proposed that liberation constitutes a personal and social process. In doing so, it brought visibility to the links between sins and the problems derived from inequality and poverty.
4. Among the organizations that participated in the act of founding the CTEP and continue to form part of it are the Evita Movement and the Movement of Excluded Workers (MTE). The starting point of the fieldwork discussed here—initiated in mid-2015—was the link with "public space workers" who are part of the Trade Union Front of the Evita Movement and joined the CTEP as militants of this political-union space.
5. These processes must be understood by taking into account the social, economic, and political transformations which took place in the country during the last three decades and their impact on the composition of the working class (Fernandez Alvarez 2020). These transformations include an employers' offensive involving an economic, social, and political restructuring which began in the mid-1970s and became more acute in the 1990s. The most dramatic consequences of this restructuring have been the deterioration of employment and income levels and a significant deepening of social inequalities, as well as rising poverty levels (Beccaria and Lopez 1996; Roffman 1997; Minujin 1997). While these indicators decreased meaningfully during the Kirchner governments (2003–2015), a significant percentage of the working class, far from being reabsorbed as part of the labor market through waged work, either swelled the ranks of the sector of the economy defined as "informal" or went into outsourcing circuits accessing precarious jobs. To illustrate, it is worth mentioning that by the beginning of this decade, one in three waged workers was unregistered (Basualdo, 2012).
6. In recent years, in different metropolitan regions of Argentina, street vending has increasingly been the object of policies of expulsion and direct repression that have intensified longstanding practices of control over this activity defined by the state as "informal" and "illegal." These policies, combined with initiatives to privatize public spaces, are paralleled in other countries not only in Latin America but also throughout the world, and are related to a growing and accelerated process of urban segregation and public space privatization (Caldeira 2001; Wacquant 2007; Susser 2012).
7. Street vendors define themselves as *buscas*, a category of self-description which refers less to a job (an activity such as a vendor) than to a way of making a living (Perelman 2017). It differs from *mantero*, which has a negative connotation that has been widely used in recent years in the media.
8. The relationship between cooperatives and income transfer programs has been a characteristic element of the social programs implemented in Argentina since 2003. Between 2003 and 2015, a series of state initiatives was developed in Argentina that emphasized the promotion of associativism and social economy (Hintze 2007; Grassi

2012). Within this framework, different state programs—such as Argentina Trabaja (Argentina Works), Ellas Hacen (Women Do), or Manos a la Obra (Let's Get to Work)—proposed the creation of work cooperatives and the transfer of monetary income to their members, introducing the requirement for their members to participate in working days aimed at improving neighborhood infrastructure, housing construction, maintenance of public spaces, production in workshops, and attendance at training activities.

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