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Stitching curtains, grinding plastic: The transformation of workers and things in Buenos Aires

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Stitching curtains, grinding plastic:

The transformation of workers and things in Buenos Aires

El tema no es que sobra gente, el tema es que falta trabajo

(the issue isn't an excess of people, but a lack of work)

--Elena Ramos, Cooperativa BAUENⁱ

[A] 19/20 December

More than a decade has now passed since Argentina gained international notoriety for defaulting on its crushing foreign debt. The convertibility plan, which had pegged the peso to the dollar at a 1-1 rate since 1991, collapsed in December of 2001 under the weight of its own non-sustainability. Skyrocketing unemployment and widespread poverty led to massive street protests on the 19th and 20th of that month, bringing an end to President De la Rúa's *Alianza* government and, eventually, to the neoliberal economic model that it had inherited. In the years that followed, the country flourished, reducing social inequity and maintaining overall growth even during the 'global' economic crises that engulfed the United States and Europe a few years later. The case of Argentina has justly sparked renewed debate, particularly within Latin America, about the nature of the state and the feasibility of neoliberal economics. Questions as to the proper role of political direction in guiding economic policy have once again taken centre stage. Furthermore, the massive popular mobilization that spelled the ultimate end of neoliberalism's legitimacy in Argentina is reflected in similar mobilizations within the Global North, as financial speculation and deregulation become increasingly identified as responsible for problems with the current economic system and its effects on those living within it. The protests that brought about such drastic change in Argentina were the product of a general dissatisfaction and frustration with political representatives and the failure of democracy to allow citizens the right of choice

concerning economic policy. Yet at this critical juncture, it is worth noting that the protests were also fundamentally concerned with ideas of work, legality, moral obligation, and human dignity. Embedded in the many acts of protest and resistance that surrounded the Argentine crisis and its aftermath were discursive struggles over the nature of social life and the relationship of the state to society.

. These discursive debates, far from being irrelevant, lay at the heart of the fundamental change that has occurred in recent years. In this chapter, I consider specifically how the idea of work has been a central point of conflict in Argentina. The nature of work, and the role of the state in protecting it as a basic right, has been a key notion around which actors have mobilized and sought legitimacy. I look at how this struggle has been defined and articulated by two separate groups united by the fact that each has *created* its own form of labour, in the absence of viable traditional options left by neoliberal-era structural reforms. The first group is a recuperated business, or an operation that was shut down by its owners and put back into production by its workers. The workers formed a cooperative that rebuilt and now operates a central Buenos Aires hotel under a principle of worker self-management. The other group I discuss is a cooperative of street recyclers, who take materials out of the garbage and turn them into a source of livelihood. In each of these, those discarded by a system no longer capable of employing them use their labor to physically transform objects that have been similarly discarded. In the process of these transformations, they effect a discursive change, refusing their position as non-workers by insisting that their labour be counted as a legitimate form of work.

Focusing specifically on the notion of ‘work’ as used by these groups illuminates how members construct value-laden moral frameworks, in response to the conditions in which they find themselves immersed. David Graeber’s writings on anthropological theories of value show that the word ‘value’ is usually found used in one of three senses: 1) in a philosophical or (moral) sense; 2) in a classic economic sense, in terms of an assigned ‘worth’; or 3) in a linguistic sense, à la Saussure, in terms of value as contrast or value as meaningful difference (Graeber 2001: 1-2).

Furthermore, Graeber makes the argument that these three senses are really all ultimately versions of the same thing. That is, that they correspond to some sort of symbolic system (however, open, mutable, or multiple) that defines the world in terms of what is important or meaningful.

I propose that the actions and words of the members of these two cooperatives demonstrate indeed how these three senses of value (economic, moral, and linguistic) are inherently interrelated. By looking at the value of work in this way, we can see how what is meaningful here represents a departure from and a challenge to the dominant (neoliberal) symbolic system. Furthermore, I take it a step farther in focusing on the material aspects through which these symbolic notions of value are concretized, operationalized or put into practice. This is particularly salient in this case, as it is through the material conversion of 'waste', that these groups enact a revaluation of themselves, of the things they work with, and of the nation as a whole. As I will demonstrate, they take the ultimate in devalued material - waste - , and propose an alternate valuation of the material. Through this medium they also enact a simultaneous revaluation of themselves as rights-bearing workers, and an alternative vision of national development and recuperation. Others have focused on the transformations in the identity or subjectivity of workers in Argentina in recent years (Battistini 2004; Dinerstein 2004; Fernández Álvarez 2004; Wallace 1998), or on the role of the body in confronting these systemic changes (Sutton 2010). I build on their insights but instead pay attention to the materiality of these conversions -- focusing on the interrelation of people and things in enacting personal, cultural and national transformations.

[A] The right to work

Key to these transformations is the way in which these workers seek to define themselves as such, after having been pushed out of the traditional labour market. Argentina's traditionally high employment rates in the formal sector has been a lasting source of pride and identity. Indeed, Argentina is notable among Latin American countries for a deeply engrained sense of

work as a right, to be enjoyed by all (adult) members of society. A long and vibrant history of activism around labour issues imbued the idea of labour with its associations to dignity and placed it as the anchor and ultimate source of social justice. As Argentine anthropologist Mariano Perelman has argued, “In general terms, it is possible to say that ‘work’ has constituted one of the most powerful disciplinary discourses of modernity, and in Argentina, it was one of the principal forms of social integration, and one that also reached those that were outside of the market of formal work” (Perelman 2011:5; see also 2007b).

This recognition of a basic sense of equality and rights is noted by Maristella Svampa, who has argued that, in spite of the existence of various kinds of social hierarchies, Argentina has been distinctive within Latin America for its “egalitarian logic in the social matrix” (Svampa2005b:47). The belief in upward mobility and social integration were supported by early state policies, such as those that instated universal education. This ‘model of integration’ (Svampa 2005) grew to extend a broad swath of social rights to the popular classes under the first Peronist administrations (1946-1955), including strong protections for workers’ rights, state-run or state-supported health care systems and pension funds.

Guillermo O’Donnell’s poignant article “*Y a mí, qué mierda me importa?*” playfully and effectively details the notion of work as a right (O’Donnell 1997). In it, he contrasts a hypothetical interaction between an Argentine service worker and a customer/client from a higher class, to a similar encounter in Brazil. He argues that, upon feeling themselves disrespected, the Brazilian person may assay the worker with the phrase “*Você sabe com quem está falando?*” (“Do you know who you’re talking to?”), as a way of demanding the deference they expect to receive. An Argentine worker, says O’Donnell, endowed with a firmly embedded sense of rights, rather than accepting that they owe deference to their class superior, is more likely to believe that they are doing them a favour by providing service to the customer. Thus, such an injunction on behalf of the client would receive as a reply something akin to the title phrase, “What the hell do I care?”

The role of the state in assuring the right to work was slowly eroded over the second half of the 20th century, beginning with the military coup against Perón in 1955 and the overturning of the short-lived Constitution of 1949, which had guaranteed social and economic rights. In spite of moments of intense resistance from the labour sector during the following decade (James 1988), the weakening of the power of organized labour and the rolling back of the gains acquired in decades of struggle were to continue.

In 1976, the most recent and most infamous of Argentina's military dictatorships launched its *Proceso de reorganización nacional*, or the Process of National Reorganization. There are many connections between the repression and policies of this dictatorship (which lasted until 1983) and the era of neoliberalism that followed. One of these lies in the fact that the structural reforms that characterize neoliberalism, and which are deemed by many as responsible for the crisis that followed, did not begin in the 1990s. Rather, privatization of state-run industries, the erosion of workers' rights and protections, and the general lessening of government regulation of the economy were all aspects of the economic program implemented by dictatorship-era Economics Minister José Martínez de Hoz.ⁱⁱ Furthermore, the brutal repression and severe weakening of the worker's movement during the dictatorship era were a necessary step in setting the stage for the later economic policies, which would have been much more difficult to implement had the workers' movement maintained its previous strength and vitality. Repression, the erosion of rights and the effects of state policies that fail to adequately consider the dire poverty in which so many millions of Argentines find themselves are intricately interconnected. As expressed by Barbara Sutton, "Human bodies apparently disappear under the neoliberal logic, just as the last military dictatorship in Argentina disappeared the real, material bodies of many people who opposed precisely that kind of socioeconomic organization" (2010: 29).

[B] *Neoliberal workers*

The 1990s marked the height of the implementation of neoliberal reforms in Argentina.ⁱⁱⁱ The irregular and uncontrolled selling off of state industries and avid encouragement of foreign investment served more to line the pockets of well-positioned members of the traditional ruling classes and politicians than to stabilize the national economy. Over 5,000 factories and businesses closed during the 1990s, and, by the end of the decade, un- and underemployment rates had reached all-time highs. Structural adjustment policies, which in Argentina included vast reductions in the number of state-employed workers, and the “flexibilization” of workers, led to a marked increase in desalaried and black market work devoid of traditional protections, in a nation that had always prided itself on stable, salaried employment as a fundamental category of identity.

The 1991 National Employment Law, which established the possibility of short-term labour contracts, marked a change from previous legislation that emphasized job stability. Later laws, in 1994 and 1995, further eroded protections to workers’ rights, limiting the liability that should be paid to injured workers, installing a ‘trial period’ for new workers, reducing the amount and situations under which employers must pay social security, and eventually eliminating all together the obligation to give severance pay to many workers.^{iv} The 1995 rewriting of the Law of Insolvency and Bankruptcy (*Ley de Concursos y Quiebras* (24.522)) was a clear expression of the marked neoliberal commitment to redefining the role of workers and redesigning the political economic system.^v This move gave the legal backing and justification to the continued transformation of Argentina into a market-driven society. Under the 1995 law, workers were redefined as neoliberal citizens whose rights are determined in terms of their degree of insertion in the market (Svampa 2005a; Faulk 2008). For the thousands of workers affected by the some 5000 factory closures that ensued in the 1990s, the new Law oversaw their rights. Fundamentally, it placed workers as creditors, alongside investors and debt-holding providers. However, it ranked workers at the bottom of the list in terms of receiving indemnity following the auction of the bankrupt business.^{vi} In practice, this led to the workers rarely if ever receiving

much compensation in terms of back pay or other debts, and absolved the owners of many of the previously held obligations towards workers in such situations. Having already taken on centrality in political discourse and economic practice, property rights now became the focus and language of determination in the juridical sphere as well.^{vii}

The era of neoliberalism in Argentina fulfills in many ways description of millennial capitalism offered by Jean and John Comaroff (2000). They use the term ‘millennial capitalism’ as it captures two key aspects of this historical moment – as occurring around the turn of the 21st and as revealing “capitalism in its messianic, salvific, even magical manifestations” (2000:293). Not only was the Argentine manifestation of capitalism in the final decade before the millennium representative of the changes within the global political economic system, particularly those affecting primary goods-producing nations, but the sense of catastrophic implosion grew to be ever-more heightened throughout the decade and culminated in the political upheaval of December 2001.

The idea of work is being conceptualized and deployed in new ways in this millennial climate. Before the 1990s, due to the strong political and juridical guarantees on good wages and a strong social security system, “Workers did not see themselves solely as selling their labor on the market, but as contributing to a larger sense of societal security through their labor” (Perelman 2007b:10). In the years leading up to and immediately following the crisis, precarious, informal work and under and unemployment became the norm. Santiago Wallace and Osvaldo Battistini each take up different aspects of the changes in workers’ subjectivity with the atomization of the neoliberal era (Wallace) and in the immediacy of the millennial moment (Battistini and contributors), focusing on the ruptures and reconfigurations produced in the construction of identity due to the destabilizing effects of the precarization of work and dire unemployment rates (Wallace 1998; Battistini, et. al. 2004). As they and others have noted, the new conditions of labour brought about by neoliberalism and its collapse have also led to drastic

reconfigurations of the meaning of work from the bottom up, by those who resist the erosion of work as a social as well as economic category.

In exploring the permutations that work has undergone in recent years, I focus on the material transformations that enable, condition, and concretize the processes of change. One example of this comes from the Cooperativa B.A.U.E.N., a workers' cooperative that forms an integral part of the recuperated businesses movement. With some 13,000 jobs created, this movement consists of factories or businesses that, after being closed or abandoned by their owners, are reopened by their workers. The Cooperativa BAUEN operates a central Buenos Aires hotel, under a principle of worker self-management. The other example I describe comes from the *cartoneros*, comprised of organizations and individuals that recover and, in some cases, minimally process recyclable materials collected from consumers. Here as well I use the example of a particular cooperative, in showing how the source of labour they themselves created is engulfed in legal and moralistic battles over legitimacy. With the heightening of the crisis on unemployment and the collapse of political and economic viability, rather than advocating for social assistance programmes that would leave the unemployed in the position of being recipients of government handouts, the *cartoneros* and *cooperativistas* insist on their right to hold onto the source of labour they themselves created, as workers. This insistence on work as a right cannot be read as either an entirely new phenomenon or as a return to a previous era.^{viii} Rather, an examination of the actions and words of these groups reveals the way in which historical patterns and trajectories have been revitalized in innovative ways. By bringing into focus the material imbrications of these changes, the things and objects which are reconfigured, reconstructed, altered, reworked, and transformed, we can see the concrete processes through which changes in ideological discourses and practices are accompanied and enabled by changes enacted on the material world.

[A] The BAUEN

The Hotel Bauen is one of the most emblematic examples of the recuperated businesses movement. Located at the intersection of Callao and Corrientes in the centre of Buenos Aires, it was originally built using state loans as part of the preparations for Argentina's hosting of the infamous 1978 World Cup. Later, it was a favoured meeting spot for the political elite. However, years of self-interested management practices and the diversion of profits into other investments left the 4-star hotel with accumulated debts that ran into the millions of dollars/pesos. The workers relate feeling that they had been "discarded" (*descartados*) and "thrown out onto the street" (*nos tiraron a la calle*) when the business closed during the peak of the 2001 economic and political crisis. By early 2003, some former workers had begun to meet with representatives of other recuperated businesses and the umbrella movement the *Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas* (National Movement of Recuperated Business, or MNER). The MNER advised them to gather as many former employees as they could and occupy the installation. Finally, on March 20, 2003, a small group of workers entered the hotel. Shortly after, they registered as a workers' cooperative.

Once inside, they were faced with the utter desolation that abandonment and pillage had left. In the year that had intervened, the former owner had stripped the hotel of everything of value, in violation of laws mandating the sale of the goods and proper allocation of proceeds to creditors, including the former workers. Before the workers could reopen for business, they needed to rebuild the hotel. The workers manually reconstructed the installation, sewing the bedspreads, laying phone lines, rebuilding floors, etc. As such, the first few years became a constant process of rebirth. They often place this material conversion of the building alongside their own reconversion into workers, but now as autonomous, self-managed workers rather than as employees. I focus first on this process of converting found and gathered materials into the physical trappings of a 4-star hotel.

[B] *Sewing curtains, laying wire: The Bauen reborn*

In 2004 and 2005, the members of the cooperative were constantly engaged in manipulating the material components of the hotel.^{ix} Workers learned to repair wiring and electrical systems, replaster walls, and lay tile, in the effort to bring the hotel back to a usable state. Video documentation of these first months and years of the BAUEN cooperative by the Grupo Alavío captures this element. Their substantial body of documentary footage from this time shows cooperative members engaged in the many physical labors that were needed to reconstruct the hotel.^x This focus on physical production and the making of things caught my attention, particularly as, unlike many of the other *recuperadas* or recovered factories which were firmly located within the industrial sector, a hotel is quintessentially part of the service sector. This distinction can be of course as illusory as it is omnipresent, yet I was struck by the marked importance given to the production and repair of material things both in the daily practice of the workers and in the way they spoke about their experience within the BAUEN. Throughout this process, the recuperation of material was *creating the conditions for labour*, as the hotel could not function unless they first recovered the materials it needed to do so. Lacking funds to invest in materials, the cooperative members combined ingenuity with a careful stewardship of abandoned materials to refashion and reconstruct everything from flooring to electronics.

In one video by Alavío, cooperative member Gladis Alegre explains the need to use the materials they already had. As she sits busily sewing curtains on a sewing machine, she tells the camera, “Every day we are building (*construyendo*) more, for our hotel. We are trying to take [new materials] as little as possible, to have a few more pesos, to survive, for ourselves and our families.” Another scene has two members working on the hotel’s extensive telephone system. One refers to his *compañero*, saying, “This guy’s trying to juggle with what we’ve got.” He connects one phone after another to a cord, testing to see if any of the old telephones from the rooms can be made to function again. “There’s another one,” the first guy says. “Nope, not this one either,” replies the other with an ironic laugh.^{xi}

In enacting these material transformations, the cooperative was able to not only repair but also to expand the usable portions of the hotel. They invested much of their profits in renovations, and in 2004 were able to open to the public a new full café/bar. By 2005, 80% of the hotel was in operation, and the ground floor hosted a bookstore, hair salon, gift shop, and point of sale for the new line of originally designed and manufactured shoes by the recuperated factory C.U.C. (*Cooperativa Unidos por el Calzado*, ex-Gatic). However, as the hotel became profitable, the pressure from both the former owners and political forces whose interests lay in the protection of property rights increased. Each of these has mounted persistent legal attacks against the cooperative's right to occupy and operate the hotel.

[B] *Property rights vs the right to meaningful equality*

The cooperative members respond to this pressure by 1) asserting their own right to operate the hotel based on the right to work as a fundamental right; and 2) denying the owners' claims to displace or control them through a detailed examination of the illegality of the owner's actions while at the helm of the business. In examining the claims made by each side, it becomes clear that the arguments presented by former owners and the cooperative are built upon different moral frameworks. The workers insist on their Constitutionally-guaranteed basic rights to a dignified manner of employment, fair and honest treatment by the owners of the business, the right to be remunerated with a wage that covers their basic needs and access to social benefits like retirement support and health care.^{xiii} In this view, the state as representative of the people holds the obligation to protect the rights of workers. Within the recuperated businesses movement the idea of work takes on the added dimension of an effort having been realized by the workers themselves. They emphasize their organization around a principle of worker self-management (*autogestión*), one that is rooted in an ethics of cooperativism and which includes a responsibility towards society as a whole. For the business owners, operating under the logic of neoliberal capitalism, the emphasis is placed on moral responsibility to shareholders and the maximization

of profitability. The state in this view takes on the role of defending the right to private property and the free operation of business. Fundamentally, these differences can be classified around the basic split between the primacy of the right to property (the owners) versus the primacy of the right to meaningful equality (the cooperative). This tension, inherent in classical liberal political philosophy, once again reasserts itself at the heart of the debates left in the wake of neoliberal restructuring.

In making their case for the right to operate the hotel, the Cooperative argues that the former owners acted both illegally and immorally in allowing the hotel to decline into bankruptcy. From this point of view, the corrupt practices of the former owners and the impunity afforded to the business class under the era of Menemist politics are seen coming together to form the principal cause of the severe unemployment and extreme debilitation of the primary and service industries in Argentina around the turn of the 21st century. In referring to the widespread practice of fraudulent bankruptcies, Rebón notes:

This behavior by the businesspeople is perceived as 'intolerable,' making space for acts of resistance. In this perspective, it is important to point out that in the literature [on recuperated businesses] and the consciousness of the workers moral explanations of the 'inappropriate behavior by the owners' as determining the business crisis abound. These hypotheses don't take into account that the very nature of capital is the maximization of gain and its reinvestment. If the conditions for the realization of the cycle of accumulation don't exist, withdrawal at the lowest cost is the morally capitalist alternative to follow (2004:65).

Nonetheless, the workers also highlight that even under the capital friendly laws passed or decreed during the era of neoliberal reform, many of the actions of the business owners remained illegal, and that this illegality was in fact an integral part of the system. The weight

given to profitability in the 1990s often led to business owners placing little regard on the continuity of the business and an exaggerated emphasis on the transportability of capital, manifested both in widespread capital flight and preferential investment in other, often foreign-based business. Indeed the corrupt business practices the owners utilized are singled out by the cooperative as part of the widespread “habitus of impunity” (Fajn 2003) that tolerated and even encouraged such practices under the economic ethos of the era.

In addition, the fact that the former owners first allowed the hotel to fall into disrepair and then to strip it of its useful parts is itself seen as criminal by the workers, as wasteful and disrespectful of the place of work. This is one of the most painful features for many members of the cooperative, who invested many years of their lives in the care of the hotel. The ‘recuperation’ of the businesses in this case holds a double meaning. For the members of the recuperated businesses movement, the dominant meaning of having ‘recuperated’ the factory or business is of having recuperated a source of labour. In the case of the BAUEN, this also includes the physical recuperation of the hotel. The nation’s productivity is being recuperated after the crisis one business at a time, in direct opposition to the long decline of Argentina’s self-held identity as an industrialized country. In this sense, workers often cite how the word ‘Bauen’ itself carries the meaning ‘to build’ or ‘to construct,’ in its original German, and they thus make a symbolic connection between their efforts and the rebuilding of the nation. They also reflect this in the naming of the Cooperative. The cooperative is called the BAUEN, which stands for Buenos Aires, Una Empresa Nacional (Buenos Aires, a National Company), encapsulating the fundamental message of the workers in insisting on the hotel as in the service of the public, national good. These debates over who deserves the right to operate the hotel are, even more crucially, embedded in debates over what the hotel *is*, i.e. waste or a workplace.

Through the language used to legitimize their actions both legally and morally, the Cooperative is concerned with demonstrating the various, interrelated transformations they enact: of themselves, from discarded workers into full rights bearing citizens; from those labouring

under a system of exploitation to self-managed producers of goods and services; and of the hotel, from yet another closed business stripped of its infrastructure to a vibrant and vital service provider, rebuilt from the detritus left in the wake of its abandonment.

[A] *Cartoneando*: From discarded workers to workers of waste

The interrelation between material transformation of objects discarded as waste and the transformation in subjectivities is also evident in the *cartoneros* movement. This section concerns these street recyclers, or those who recover and, in some cases, minimally process reusable objects from the garbage for resale.

Though actual numbers are difficult to calculate, there are an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 people in the Greater Buenos Aires Metropolitan area engaged in the recollection and selling of recyclable materials pulled from garbage (Magnani 2006).^{xiii} This represents at least a threefold swelling of the ranks of the traditional *cirjuas*, i.e., those who engaged in this activity prior to the late 1990s. The increase in numbers has led to increased visibility of this activity. The attention paid to street recyclers by the media and academics reveals and partially constructs the discursive battles within which the recyclers have become embroiled. As was the case with the BAUEN workers, these battles take place on grounds of legality and within competing moral frameworks.

The figure of the *cartonero*, and the gradual replacement of the word *ciruja* as that most often used to describe this increasingly notable social activity, is a result of the end-of-millennium crisis. As more and more Argentines fell into poverty, including wide swaths of the middle classes, the number of people involved in exploring income-generating alternatives to salaried work caught the attention of the mass media and *cartoneros* became symbols of national degradation. At that same time, formerly despised activities gained a new significance, and the *cartonero* became a new subject position that allowed those engaged in street recycling, and the journalists and academics who talked about them, to reevaluate and revalue a traditionally

deprecated practice (Paiva 2008). To the extent that the recyclers engage in these assertions of public redefinition, it has been primarily through the medium of the cooperatives that they have expressed themselves and fought for public policies that attend to and accommodate their needs and the service they provide.^{xiv}

With only a few scattered precedents, street recyclers first began forming cooperatives in the latter half of the 1990s. This first wave of cooperatives was organized mainly by traditional street recyclers, i.e., those that had been engaged in the activity throughout their lives and, in many cases, had inherited the practice from their parents and even their grandparents. They came together in search of better conditions, particularly as the crisis of neoliberalism changed the basic organization and possibilities of scavenging.^{xv} A second wave of cooperatives came slightly later, and included more of the newly impoverished middle class. These were largely comprised of or given impulse by people who had little or no previous experience collecting garbage, but began to do so as a result of new unemployment. As Argentine sociologist Verónica Paiva notes, the formation of cooperatives was especially prevalent among this group, as a way of alleviating the feelings of indignity and desperation brought by the loss of salaried or regularized work (Paiva 2008; Fernández Álvarez 2004).

The Cooperative Tren Blanco is one of the cooperatives of street recyclers that operate in the Greater Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.^{xvi} Formed in 2004 by some 10 *cartoneros*, it sought to increase the value of the collected recyclables by partially processing the materials. Rather than continuing to collect materials themselves, the cooperative focuses on buying the materials collected by others from their locale (Suárez, Partido of San Martín) along the (now defunct) Tren Blanco line^{xvii}.

With the support of and microcredit loans from the NGO LaBase,^{xviii} the cooperative is able to access a much higher return on collected materials through separation, washing, and grinding, primarily of PET plastics.^{xix} For example, microloans from LaBase allowed the cooperative Tren Blanco to buy a machine to grind recovered plastics on their own, thus greatly

multiplying both the quantity of material that they can transport at a time and the profit they can get upon selling it.

In the case of the *cartoneros*, as it was with the recuperated businesses, these cooperatives actively contest the value placed on their labour morally, economically and linguistically as they define their activities. One example that demonstrates this is a case from 2002 that was brought in front of the Supreme Court of the City of Buenos Aires, in an attempt to declare as unconstitutional the dictatorship-era clause in the City Ordinance (from 1977) that made street recycling illegal (Perelman 2007:255-256; also 2011). Those in favor of overturning the ordinance argued that it violated the *cartoneros* right to work by making their labor illegal. Opponents argued that the right to work cannot be used as a shield for illegal activities.

Cartoneros also frame their activities in moral terms. They argue that they have transformed themselves, re-becoming laborers by ‘*cartoneando*’. Many *cartoneros* cite how this work, as difficult as it may be, is still preferable to simply receiving government welfare payments,^{xx} for the sense of dignity it allows them. The ethics of work remains very strong in Argentina, and being a recipient of welfare (*beneficiario*) rather than a worker (*trabajador*) is a difficult subject position to assume. In addition, their labor is contrasted to delinquency. As Francisco Suárez has argued, “The activity of recuperation shows the internalization of a culture of work and not of crime...There, where work doesn’t exist, they invent it, they self-employ. They invent or generate work out of what others discard” (Suárez, cited in Perelman 2007a:263). As with the BAUEN, it is the recuperation of materials that is *creating the conditions for labour* by literally taking hold of the abandoned means of production, in this case garbage, before they rot away or are removed permanently from the production cycle.

The issue of environmental sustainability is another terrain on which the battle is pitted. Though the increase in the number of street recyclers is unquestionably due to rising unemployment and the lack of viable and stable work alternatives, a number of *cartoneros* have come to understand their activities as part of a broader project of remaking the nation and

refounding the economy on sustainable environmental principles. Those living in Suárez, for example, are acutely aware of the problems produced by the need to adequately deal with the million and a half tons of waste produced yearly in Buenos Aires – their neighborhood is built on top of an abandoned dump.^{xxi} In addition, the model of economic/environmental sustainability that is invoked harks back to earlier, historically resonant ideas, in this case, import substitution industrialization models. When the 1 peso-1 dollar parity ended during the economic crisis, it made importing raw materials much more expensive, and the market and price paid for local substitutes increased dramatically. This increased demand for local materials was an important factor in making street recycling a viable option. *Cartoneros*, through the medium of the cooperative, make a moral claim to national sustainability through their role in developing and supplying local industry.

For those with a stake in the lucrative waste collection industry, rather than being a part of the solution, *cartoneros* have often been presented as part of the problem. Resistance to the *cartoneros* by waste collection companies may be partly explained by economic motivations. Not accidentally, the 1977 prohibition on scavenging accompanied the moment when privatization of this service was beginning. Until 2005, the businesses that held the contracts to collect garbage in the City of Buenos Aires were paid according to tonnage collected. As such, materials pulled out of the line of collection led, in theory if not in practice, to a reduction in their profits. Since 2005, they have been paid by area cleaned. However, recycling is still a potentially lucrative industry, and there are those who attempt to reserve the monopoly of waste for a concentrated number of actors. These interest groups code the activities of *cartoneros* as being done by scavengers or thieves. Waste collection companies have also insisted on their ability to collect recyclables more efficiently, cleanly, and safely. They allege that the *cartoneros* are performing an activity that is disorderly, unsafe, and dangerous --to themselves, but also to the residents of the wealthy neighborhoods which they enter in order to collect material. These claims play in large measure on the fears of some of the inhabitants of the wealthier

neighborhoods, who view the poor as ‘invading’ their living spaces, bringing filth, danger, and disease into visibility. Cartoneros themselves are seen by many of these residents as matter out of place.

Faced with this stigmatization, those who have taken to collecting recyclables, as with the Cooperative BAUEN, find validation in proactively defining their activities as work. The importance of this category as a source of social identity in Argentina makes this assertion a powerful source of legitimacy.^{xxii} I find it instructive to consider this idea of work as forming the centerpiece for a regime of value akin to the kinds described by Graeber, mentioned earlier in this chapter. In doing so, these groups advance a regime of value that challenges that embraced by many of the economic elite who oppose their actions. The notion of work as put forth by these groups can be considered in terms of those value meanings outlined above:

- 1) Morally, in that these groups treat the notion of work as a moral value, and, specifically, their right to dignified work as a fundamental right that the state must guarantee;
- 2) Economically, as a classical Marxist critique, in that they are challenging the features of capitalism that allowed labor to become an abstraction that can be commoditized (bought and sold). Rather, their valuation of labor reasserts its relationship to human creativity -- that is, labour as the way through which human beings create their worlds, their social ties as well as their physical environment, through *autogestión*, which is not focused on maximizing profit but has other aims. As such, they are resisting the commoditization of labour by reinserting into it other kinds of social meanings;
- 3) Linguistically, in that the term 'worker' is contrasted to that of 'unemployed' (*desocupado*), or contrasted to someone who receives a government subsidy payment (*beneficiario*), which also gets at the relationship to the state and the citizen's rights in relation to that state. Also, they

define their work as that of *autogestionado, sin patrón*, in distinction to that of someone '*en relación de dependencia*'.

A map of these linguistic negative values or value as contrast is shown in Figure 6.1

It is the notion of work through which this alternate regime of value is being expressed, in a unified way across these three senses. And furthermore, these workers demonstrate the relationship of the material to the discursive, how these ideas are concretized in practice, by utilizing precisely the moral equivalent of the discarded worker (material waste) in enacting these conversions.

[A] Conclusion

Since the mid 20th century in Argentina, work has been seen as a 'natural part of life' (Perelman 2007b:11), with all adult members of society deserving of a stable and salaried source of employment. Yet in practice this 'natural part of life' is a contested category that shapes the political, legal and economic system within which the workers are inserted. In this chapter, I have sought to show how, through the material conversion of things, post-crisis workers in Argentina seek their own conversion, from a discarded surplus of labour into workers, a social category that carries significant weight and profound importance. In this process, they contest neoliberal notions of work, which reduce the labour force to a commoditized, flexibilized variable and define rights in terms of an individual's level of insertion in the market. They seek to define their legitimacy on a contrasting set of moral and linguistic grounds. To return to the words of cooperative member Elena with which I opened this chapter, "*El tema no es que sobra gente, el tema es que falta trabajo* (the issue isn't an excess of people, but a lack of work)". As her words

reflect, primacy is given to an ethics of social and national, rather than individual, benefit. The current discursive battles surrounding the cooperatives of workers in recuperated businesses and of street recyclers focus on redefining their place in society, as productive members engaged in dignified activities that continuously (re)construct the nation through the slow but determined reconversion of discarded materials.

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ⁱ Some names have been changed, and all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

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ⁱⁱⁱ On neoliberalism, see Greenhouse 2010; Harvey 2005; Saad-Filho and Johnson 2005. For an overview of neoliberalism in Argentina, see Teubal 2004.

^{iv} See especially Ley Nacional de Empleo 24.103 (1991), Ley 24.465 (1995); Ley 24.557 (1995), and Presidential Decree 2609/93.

^v See Fassi and Gebhardt 2000 for a detailed study of this law. Modifying this law, especially in ways that give primacy to the reinitiation of activity has been a priority for a number of the recuperadas, and has served as a focal point for their actions.

^{vi} A new law for cooperatives, proposed by CNCT and put forth by the ruling kirchnerist party, was approved by the Argentine Senate on June 2, 2011. It prioritizes the solvency of the business, giving the workers legal protection to operate the establishment as a cooperative and to

use all credits, indemnizations, backpay and other unmet obligations towards the workers as payment. The law is likely to face legal challenges.

^{vii} Carlos Forment, personal communication.

^{viii} See García Allegrone, et.al 2004 for a historical context of such takeovers.

^{ix} The Bauen Hotel (lower case) refers to the hotel installation itself, as well as the name of the hotel when it was operated by the former owners. The cooperative is called the BAUEN, which stands for Buenos Aires, Una Empresa Nacional (Buenos Aires, a National Company), and itself encapsulates the fundamental message of the workers in insisting on the hotel as in the service of the public, national good.

^x For more on the Grupo Alavío, see <http://www.revolutionvideo.org/agoratv/index.htm>; <http://www.revolutionvideo.org/alavio> (in Spanish and English). For an interview with one key member, see Rodríguez 2010.

^{xi} These clips can be seen at http://www.revolutionvideo.org/agoratv/programas/empresas_recuperadas/defensa_bauen_1.html, min 14:26-16:00 and min 17:13. In Spanish with English subtitles.

^{xii} Article 14 and 14bis of the Argentine Constitution details the rights of workers along these lines.

^{xiii} Sutton cites numbers for 2002 indicating 70,000 to 100,000 cartoneros in the Greater Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (2010:40).

^{xiv} Perelman makes the argument that traditional recyclers, or those that have engaged in this practice for an extended period of time pre-dating the current crisis, are more likely to view their activities as ‘work’, while those who have begun street collecting more recently are more likely to see this as a temporary survival activity, as an interruption in their trajectory as workers (Perelman 2007, 2011). While not disputing Perelman’s findings, I am arguing that the most vocal assertions of a vision of ‘cartoneando’ as a category of work from cartoneros themselves

comes from those who have formed cooperatives. Among these, many of the cooperativistas are those with previous experience in a more formalized labor market, who thus seek to build and interpret their current experience within a revitalized framework of ‘work.’

^{xv} Principal among these changes were the modification, in 1997, of the law that determined the mode of garbage collection in the City of Buenos Aires, and the end of the pegging of the Argentine peso to the dollar, in 2002. See Paiva 2008, esp. pp 75-94.

^{xvi} Other examples are discussed in Paiva 2008; Medina 2007; Schamber and Suárez 2007.

^{xvii} A 2003 documentary film, *El tren blanco*, by Nahuel García, Sheila Pérez Giménez y Ramiro García traces the lives of users of the train. This train service, started by TBA in 1999, sought to keep cartoneros off of the commuter train lines that link the provincial areas that ring the city of Buenos Aires with more central neighborhoods. The service was ended under the administration of Mauricio Macri on December 28, 2007, leading to forceful protests by its users. Though a system of transportation by truck was theoretically put in place to replace it, as of this writing the City of Buenos Aires, has yet to provide a truly functional alternative.

^{xviii} Part of the NGO The Working World. See www.theworkingworld.org for an overview of the organization, and www.labase.org for open information on the cooperative and their loans. A short film on the organization and the Cooperative Tren Blanco can be found at <http://www.theworkingworld.org/trenBlancoLarge.mov>.

^{xix} See Magnani 2006 for a brief overview of the cooperative.

^{xx} Under the Jefe y Jefas de Hogares, or Heads of Households plan, the un and underemployed living in poverty are entitled to monthly payments..

^{xxi} This statistic is taken from:

http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/med_ambiente/basura_cero/?menu_id=30973, and is based on data from 2004. Greenpeace Argentina reports that the City of Buenos Aires sent 2,110,122 tons of garbage to landfills in 2010. Under the 2005 Law Basura Cero, or Zero Garbage (Ley

1854), the City is required to reduce to zero the amount of waste sent to sanitary landfills by 2020. Many organizations have strongly criticized the inability or unwillingness of the Macri administration to make responsible progress toward this goal. See, for example, Videla, Eduardo, “La ley de basura cero no es bienvenida,” *Página 12*, 11 June 2011; Quispe, Carina, “Una ley que todavía no se aplica,” *La Nación* 19 June 2010.

^{xxii} Even so, the idea of cartoneando still frequently appears as an incomplete form for many of those engaged in the activity, as reflected in the way many define their activities as work but when asked if they are unemployed will immediately respond yes. As such, it is considered as more of a form of work than begging or receiving a subsidy payment, but less than holding a salaried job. For this point I am indebted to Mariano Perelman (see especially Perelman 2011).