A response to ‘Building from heterogeneity: the decomposition and recomposition of the working class viewed from the “popular economy” in Argentina’

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The curious term “popular economy” gained traction in Argentina during the Kirchner years (2003–2015). In her forum statement, Fernandez Alvarez explores how the category is mobilized by and for a diverse group of workers who, depending on one’s political and/or theoretical leaning one might categorize as “informal” (Munck 2013), “dispossessed” (Li 2010), “marginalized” (Wacquant 2009), or “the precariat” (Standing 2011). Fernandez Alvarez introduces us to the Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy (CTEP), a trade union for “wageless” workers—people who piece together a living in a variety of ways ranging from waste-picking, to car-minding, to selling on the train, to working for state-driven cooperatives which clean plazas and roadways. The CTEP seems to offer an alternative to the disorganized, embittered, “dangerous” precariat of Guy Standing’s imagination.

Fernandez Alvarez prefers to move away from the dichotomous thinking, implicit in those other terms. She wants instead to emphasize the possibilities offered up by the heterogeneous category of “wageless workers.” Interested in the CTEP as a new form of worker organization and class (re)formation, Fernandez Alvarez wants to consider their political potential. I was pleased to read her account, and do not have any real disagreements with her interpretation. My comments, therefore, are not particularly polemical, rather they reflect on her case in light of my own understanding of Argentine working-class political culture.

CTEP offers us a hopeful and potentially illuminating case, engaging a variety of pressing political and analytic questions. As informality becomes an ever more central feature of our economies, the question of political strategies for organizing and mobilizing these diverse workers becomes ever more urgent. How do (or should?) subalterns organize? And especially subalterns whose conditions, rhythms, and locations of work are so varied? CTEP activists seem to propose an answer for this dilemma in the Argentine context: to reconstitute a working-class identity for workers through the idiom of labor unions.

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How striking: a *trade union* of wageless workers. Readers unfamiliar with Argentina may be surprised to discover that unions and unionization remain salient forms of political mobilization and expression at this moment in the twenty-first century. Labor unions have long been a force to be reckoned with in the country. They attained considerable political heft under Perón (president 1946–55, 1973–74), and although, as Fernandez Alvarez notes, their power has been greatly diminished, they still matter. Union leaders are public figures whose photographs are recognized on the front pages of newspapers and who are capable of calling important strikes. In this context, where working-class politics have often been bound up with (although not reducible to) union politics, observers have been especially concerned about the effects of de-industrialization, informalization and de-unionization on people's ability to organize politically. A response to this situation emerged during the deep political crisis at the end of the 1990s up to and through the crash of 2001/02, in the form of the *piqueteros*—a political movement of the unemployed described by Fernandez Alvarez above. The *piqueteros* emerged as the political face of the dispossessed, using the *piquete* (blocking highways) as their strategy of choice, since the traditional strategies like strikes, walkouts, and collective bargaining were unavailable to them (Quirós 2011). At their height, the *piqueteros* were key players, but there was something of the image of rabble about them. It is not entirely clear from Fernandez Alvarez's account here how connected the CTEP is to the variety of *piqueteros*' organizations, but the style seems quite different.

Another key word here is “popular.” In Latin America, and Argentina in particular, “popular” connotes the notion of the “the people”—the same people who are the subjects of “populism” (Laclau 1977, 2005). One of the problems confronting those of us interested in understanding working-class struggles in Argentina during the Kirchner era was its “pinkness.” The Kirchners were characterized as part of the pink tide, the wave of post- or even anti-neoliberal regimes in Latin America (Goodale and Postero 2013). They were Peronists—read populists. Were they left? Were they left enough? As anyone who has seen Evita will know, Perón and by association Peronism is often characterized as fascist. I am not going near that debate here except to direct interested readers to labor historian Daniel James' authoritative work (James 1988). The Kirchners, and especially Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, certainly partook of the language, symbols, and legacy of Peronism—shocking many and charming others when Eva Perón appeared on the new one-hundred-peso bill. We know we are supposed to hate populism (cf. de la Torre 2010)—and contemporary big men from Trump to Duterte to Bolsonaro), but Argentine populism is bound up with labor unions and labor struggles. Is the CTEP, then, made possible by the Kirchner variety of populism? Can, should, ought Marxist readers dismiss pink populism? In work on activist pensioners in Argentina (DuBois 2013), I found their persistent political engagement was nourished by a variety of political experiences and identities on the left and not-so-left, suggesting that people use the ideological resources they have to hand. I look forward to learning more about the ways CTEP activists and rank-and-file craft political identities and agendas into the future.

The comment also reminds us to do the anthropological thing, recalling that local political traditions and identities might be drawn upon in making something new and useful.

Compliance with ethical standards

This contribution is not original research, but rather a commentary based on my general expertise in the area. I do refer fleetingly to my own research, but cite published work to that end. Nonetheless, I will address the questions in turn.

Conflict of interest The author declares no conflict of interest.

Research involving human participants and/or animals This is a commentary and is not research. The research I have conducted over my career has always been in compliance with the Canadian Tri-Council policies for research involving human subjects (once that policy was in place, and to its predecessors before that).

Informed consent Likewise no research was conducted but my former research has subscribed to appropriate informed consent protocols.

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