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# Everyday antagonisms: Organising economic practices in Mercado Bonpland, Buenos Aires

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## Abstract

In 2001, Argentina experienced a profound social political and economic crisis. In response, a broad and diverse social and economic movement was created, involving autonomous politics, horizontal organisation, autogestion, neighbourhood assemblies and state rupture. The creation of alternative economic systems played an important role in this challenge to capitalist hegemony, producing a different and more humanising kind of economics focused on the provision of opportunities for more stable, sustainable and dignified production. This paper uses an innovative theoretical approach, drawing on both Marxism and diverse economy literature, to explore data collected during empirical research between 2013 and 2016 into a solidarity retail market in Buenos Aires, the *Mercado de Economía Solidaria Bonpland*. It argues that such interventions in the interstices of capitalism offer a radical and alternative solution through a politics of everyday antagonism. By insisting on economic plurality in the present via a series of oppositions and compromises, the Mercado both drew attention to the failings of capitalism, and created a genuine and visible social and economic alternative.

## Keywords

Argentina, diverse economies, antagonism, autogestion, everyday life politics

## Introduction

In the late 1990s, Argentina experienced severe recession, culminating in a profound fiscal debt crisis, which peaked in 2001 (Zibechi, 2008). The economic predicament of the country galvanised a lively social and political movement against the government and its neoliberal policies, organised from neighbourhood assemblies and workplaces in urban centres under

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the banner ‘They All Must Go’ (Sitrin, 2012). Literature on these protests has done much to forward our understanding of the way in which capital crisis provides not merely a set of circumstances for protest, but also for the presentation of alternative social and economic systems (see Colectivo Situaciones, 2011; Clare, 2019; Dinerstein, 2014; Mason-Deese, 2016; Sitrin and Azzellini, 2014), including urban commoning (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Huron, 2018), and challenges to personal and public sector indebtedness, such as the Strike Debt campaign (Strike Debt, 2012). These variegated responses share a concern for approaching the radical history and potential of organising from the perspective of everyday practice, viewed as a platform to build a sustained campaign over the longer term.

This paper aims to explore the challenges and potentials inherent in acts of making an economy that is resistant to both value extraction and economic crisis, focusing on a small retail market, Mercado Bonpland, in Palermo, Buenos Aires. Established by the Palermo Viejo Assembly in 2007 in an abandoned municipal market space, the market encompasses 17 organisations operating their own stalls and selling products from fruit and vegetables and dried foods to drinks, books, pottery, clothes and artisanal products. Those involved aim to develop communal ways of organising that are ‘autogestive,’ i.e. they involve a form of communally organised production that aims not to extract surplus value from labour, create less exploitative working conditions and more dignified work, ‘to self-create, self-control and self-provision . . . to be self-reliant’ (Vieta, 2014: 783). In Argentina, the practice of autogestion is foundational to political movements emphasising self-management and autonomy, which reflect ‘the politics of direct democracy’ (Sitrin and Azzellini, 2014: 32) as well as movements of self-managed factories (Fishwick, 2019; Ozarow and Croucher, 2014; Ruggeri and Vieta, 2015). The collective within the market supports reclaimed factories, small family farms, co-operative and artisanal production, as well as dignified work, fair trade policies (i.e. where producers decide the terms for production and sales of their goods) and responsible consumption. This paper will examine these processes of production in more depth, tracing the networks of autogestion on which they draw, and exploring the ways in which a process of antagonism and compromise underlies these attempts to develop an alternative politics of everyday life in the city.

The paper aims to contribute to a rich literature examining alternative (Leyshon, 2005) and diverse (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2009) economic practices that offer a post-capitalist alternative to ‘capital-o-centric’ hegemony (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006). It focuses particularly on the foundational role played by antagonism in alternative economic systems: the ways in which a series of deliberately-created oppositions are used to construct, and to draw attention to, the alterity of the challenge posed by anti-capitalist spaces. In such a view, oppositional economic practices emerge as a *process* of ‘everyday antagonising’: both a negation of the norms of everyday life from below, in order to demonstrate how it can be lived differently, and a series of acts that also draw attention to the inequality of capitalist processes. In such a view, alternatives to capitalist commodity production and exchange emerge not as isolated examples of plurality and diversity from the margins, but as responses that are fundamentally shaped by resistance to the normative pressures of capitalist socio-economic relations (Newman, 2014). The Mercado Bonpland emerges within such an analysis as the site where a series of challenges, tensions and compromises must be negotiated, as stallholders constantly seek to enact a set of oppositional economic and political commitments through the complex process of the production, exchange, and consumption of commodities. Drawing on feminist literature, the economy of the market emerges as a system of social relations created ‘from below,’ a site where the contribution made by those at the informal (and sometimes illegal) margins can be recognised (Gago, 2014), in a manner that

highlights the complex entanglements of everyday life and markets in the city (González, 2018; González and Waley, 2012).

The paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, I explore the theoretical literature on diverse economies in order to offer my own insights into the role played by antagonism in the making of alternative social and economic spaces. Secondly, I analyse different moments of economic organising in Mercado Bonpland, to investigate the specific role played by oppositional antagonisms, as those involved negotiate social and economic relationships with producers, consumers, neighbours, and the local and national state. A third section then synthesises these findings in order to develop an overarching conceptualisation of the diverse, antagonistic, and processual nature of alternative autogestive economic practice.

## **Antagonistic and everyday political responses to crisis**

In this paper, I will develop insights from two literatures that are not often drawn together: those on diverse economic alternatives, and those adopting a Marxist approach – both of which strive to rethink the ways that social relations of capital are constructed. My aim is to develop a hybrid conceptualisation that highlights the role played by strategic antagonistic practices that are ‘truly transformative of our social relations’ (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014: n.p.) because they draw attention to the possibility of creating different outcomes from the present contradictions that we face. This builds upon an under-explored aspect of diverse economies, which champions diversity while also recognising difficult structural challenges. Such an analysis moves beyond simple binaries of resistance and co-optation, as Gibson-Graham recognise in their discussion of a number of empirical case studies:

Each of these interventions/organizations . . . works with and accepts funding from governments, international agencies, foundations, or collaborating partners that may not share their values and goals. While recognizing the risk of co-optation that such relationships pose, they refuse to see co-optation as a necessary condition of consorting with power. (Gibson-Graham, 2006: xxvi)

In this paper, I will argue that the concept of antagonism helps to unpick these types of strategic collaboration, drawing attention to the role played by plurality and diversity in the construction of everyday and lived alternatives to capitalist economic relations. These insights will then be used to discuss a series of empirical examples.

## **Diverse economies**

There is a large literature within the geographical disciplines on attempts to create a more equitable world through alternative economics (see, for instance, Fuller et al., 2010; Jonas, 2014; Lee et al., 2003; Wills, and Lee, 2014; Zademach and Hillebrand, 2014). Writers have focused on the diversity of community economies (Cornwell, 2012; Taylor, 2014), and on the social relations (Poirier, 2014) and forms of solidarity (Arampatzi, 2018; Miller, 2006; Safri, 2015) fostered by ‘more-than-capitalist’ or ‘post-capitalist’ economies (Albert, 2003; Chatterton and Pusey, 2019). Of particular relevance for this paper is the work produced by Gibson and Graham, who have pointed out the genuine political possibilities inherent in the act of theorising and recognising diverse economic frameworks (GibsonGraham, 1996, 2006; see also Rose, 2019). Such work was meant to challenge some totalising Marxist visions of capitalism and alternative possibilities (see, for example, debates with Harvey, 2015). Instead, Gibson and Graham work from the assumption that resistance is possible, if we recognise the multiple loci where the economy is ‘open to the possibilities of change’

(Gibson-Graham, 2006: 129, 2009). Through such a view they aim to create ‘weak theory’ of capitalism, that can challenge its inevitability and leave ‘an open space for novelty and surprise,’ for new solutions and approaches (Gritzas and Kavoulakos, 2016: 921).

Such a view is not uncontroversial: several Marxist scholars have accused proponents of diverse economic approaches of failing to recognise the underlying ways in which the alternatives they analyse are also dependent on wider capitalist circuits of production and consumption (Jonas, 2014: 25). Debates drawing out differentiation between diverse and Marxist scholars are established elsewhere, yet through a focus on antagonism it is possible to draw out similarities of these approaches (see also Derickson, 2009; Lincoln, 2003; Ollman, 2005). In part, this problem boils down to an issue about temporality: it is quite consistent to argue that in the timeframe of the present, it is impossible to step entirely outside of capitalist circuits of production and consumption, and *simultaneously* to argue that alternative economic spaces nonetheless offer a wealth of ‘emergent properties’ that are full of suggestive radical potential for the future (Jonas, 2014: 25). As Gritzas and Kavoulakos (2016) have asserted, such a viewpoint entails a recognition of the freedom to act and to resist within a material reality shaped by capitalism, the state and wider relations of power. Process-based thinking that explores examples from the present is therefore able to engage with current challenges while also considering emancipatory practices that have the potential to produce a very different future.

As this paper will argue, however, the negotiation of these relations, in an effort to produce the economy ‘from below’ as an everyday community practice, is necessarily messy, complex, and rife with antagonisms, and sometimes does not succeed. Yet, it is nonetheless also foundational to a politics of radical and open possibility. This paper seeks to develop an understanding of the ways in which the everyday can become a domain for radical action via the concept of ‘autogestion,’ meaning not only a worker-managed economy of production and social reproduction, but also the development and connection (social and economic) of autonomous, collective movements and networks (see Vieta, 2014). In the Argentine context, autogestion has played a crucial role in the post-2001 community organising, becoming a central feature of ‘concrete projects related to sustenance and survival, territory, changing social relationships’ (Sitrin, 2012: 3). The movement of these concrete projects, such as Mercado Bonpland, encompasses struggles for subsistence and better conditions, but also a new political imaginary which challenges the inevitability of the status quo.

### *Antagonising in the everyday*

The notion that capitalist social relationships are built on the exploitation of workers via the extraction of surplus value is a foundational tenet of Marxist economics, and the basis of theories related to the inescapably conflictual nature of labour relations in a capitalist system. Considerable complexity has been added by feminist theories of social reproduction, which have drawn attention to the ways in which waged labour depends on quanta of unrecognised and unwaged material labour, often disproportionately conducted by women working in the domestic sphere (notably Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 2012; Toupin, 2018). More recently, these insights have been expanded to include circuits of informal and sometimes illegal activity that interface in innovative ways with more official capitalist circuits of production (Lancione, 2019) as well as breaking down the binary of informal and formal activity through the practice of popular economy (Gago, 2018; Gago et al., 2018). This paper uses the concept of ‘antagonism’ to capture practices that

acknowledge, address, and engage in these conflicts over productive and socially reproductive labour, in order to suggest radical alternative ways of building an economy.

This paper draws its use of everyday life politics (De Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1980) focused on the political encroachment of social relations of capital into everyday life. Furthermore, a focus on everyday life politics, is also a ‘decentring’ and opening out of the sites and bodies who struggle, to recognise the political organising of other sites, practices and bodies (Sacks, 2019). These everyday politics are embedded in a deep knowledge of place, understood as both ‘the local’ and as ‘culture’ (Routledge, 2017), valuing political organisation through proximity to ‘personal and collective resistance’ (Stavrides, 2010: 137). As such, everyday life politics are foundational for prefigurative political organisation (Dinerstein, 2015) where political goals are attained through a focus on the means of organising (Yates, 2015) ‘autonomous geographies’ practices of ‘resistance and creation’ (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). Drawing on these everyday life politics, everyday antagonism recognises that beyond resistance, as refusal, antagonism engages in the friction between resistance and creation. Everyday antagonism then draws on the ‘incessant improvisation’ to make ends meet, with complex sets of strategic relations, compromises and challenges (Simone, 2005: 518). Rather than a teleological theory, they are everyday acts embedded in ‘quiet stubbornness and small acts of refusal’ (Li, 2019: 30).

Feminist theories of social reproduction have also demonstrated the political potential that can lie within apparently mundane everyday tasks, such as organising and cooking food, or washing clothes. Furthermore, they push beyond the modernist categories of ‘formal/informal sectors, home/workplace, the household/the economy’ (Peake and Rieker, 2013) by examining production of everyday life. This opens a domain of the everyday to radical practice, suggesting that that even the most quotidian of tasks can become the locus of alternative social and economic practice if their value is recognised as part of the economic system of value creation (De Simoni, 2015; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2004; Pérez-Orozco, 2014). These feminist insights not only draw out the ways in which value is created by both ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ labour, such as housework, but also demonstrate that diverse economic practices are already part of a system that creates value for capital. As such, these forms of labour may point to challenges and potentials within current relations, suggesting opportunities for very different types of economic organisation.

This paper associates these two concepts – antagonism and the everyday – to suggest that the act of antagonising, of drawing attention to the contradictions within capitalism as a strategy of resistance, can work to forge new ways of (re)producing everyday life, building new strategies between actors, spaces and relations, and creating ‘new lines of antagonism, resistance and alignment’ (Newman, 2014: 3298). In the concept of ‘everyday antagonism,’ I seek to recognise both the ‘antagonistic character of capitalist society’ (Bonnet, 2009: 45) and the quotidian forms of resistance that it makes possible. Radical forms of alterity and difference, in such a view, develop out of a clash of interests that is foundationally inherent within capital. Yet, drawing on the use of antagonism in the open Marxist tradition, resistance to it is not confined to the limits of an oppositional dialectic, in which struggle has always already been defined and captured by power (Bonefeld, 2013; Holloway, 2010). I draw on antagonism to analyse from ‘the world of missfitting, from the multiplicity of particular rebellions, diginities and cracks’ (Holloway, 2010: 20). Whilst the autonomist inversion of Marxism was to start with the working class as the driving force of capital (see Tronti, 1979), the open Marxist tradition draws on negative dialectics, to start from the ‘struggle of the working class,’ as the ‘refusal’ (Holloway, 2009: 97.) In this paper I define antagonisms as situated refusals in-against-and-beyond capitalist social relations, as a



complex web of resistance and creation. This means that an economic plurality can emerge within capitalist relations in the present, allowing the creation of new types of social and economic relationship: the ‘against’ of capitalist class relations can be transformed into a ‘beyond’ of new economic and social practice, which is replete with potency and potential for the future (Holloway, 2010).

### *Power over and power to act: Antagonism in process*

The concept of everyday antagonism assumes that individuals have some capacity to take meaningful resistant action within the confines of existing power structures. Power, in such a formulation, is not monolithic but sufficiently multiple to allow contradictions and fractures to emerge at any given time. Drawing on the work of the militant research collective, *Colectivo Situaciones*, in Buenos Aires, this paper distinguishes between ‘power-to’ and ‘power-over’ in the social flow of practice. In the Argentine context, these different forms of power are recognised by a semantic distinction:

In Spanish there are two words for ‘power’: ‘poder’ and ‘potencia’, which derive from the Latin words ‘potestas’ and ‘potentia’. *Colectivo Situaciones*’ understanding of power is rooted in this distinction they take from Spinoza. While ‘potencia’ is a dynamic, constituent dimension, ‘poder’ is static, constituted. Potencia defines our power to do, to affect, and be affected, while the mechanism of representation that constitutes ‘poder’ separates ‘potencia’ from the bodies that are being represented. (*Colectivo Situaciones*, 2003: n.p., n 2)

The distinction between ‘poder’ and ‘potencia’ is made by both literature and movements in Argentina seeking to change the way that we understand power in order to create new possibilities for action (Clare et al., 2018; Dussell, 2008). If power is understood as an inescapable, oppressive, static, top-down structure, this negatively impacts our power to act; by contrast, an understanding of power that is grounded in potential to take creative resistant actions can lead to alternative ways of organising. *Colectivo Situaciones* use this insight to think strategically about opportunities to create different possibilities, by thinking through the potential and also limitations of both aspects of power relations. This allows antagonism to emerge as a power to act strategically in the context of existing social, political, and economic relations, in a way that simultaneously challenges and develops an alternative to those relations (Holloway in Holloway and Callinicos, 2005: n.p.).

Recovering the potential of power-to-act in a situation where capitalist power relations constitute strong forms of power-over can therefore become a radical act, articulating and attempting to create a different context where the contradiction between workers and capital can be addressed. In this way, the power-over relation can be subverted against itself: if labour is the ‘motor of capital’ (Tronti, 1965), then the creative power of those workers can be used to challenge as well. Co-operative forms of organisation that aim to create different conditions than those produced through exploitative surplus value extraction both articulate the power relations (‘poder’) upon which capitalist social relations relies, and simultaneously challenge them by presenting an alternative form of economic organisation, a ‘potencia’ for things to be different. Where this occurs at the level of everyday life, it represents not only a theoretical, but a vital, practical and lived alternative. Increasing potencia therefore both recognises the constitutive antagonism on which the status quo is build (poder), and simultaneously builds an alternative challenge from below, finding a solution that ‘ruins, spoils, and/or confronts that supposed hegemony’ (Gago, 2015: 26).

Thinking about potencia in the economy, means considering plural opportunities that are available within processes of production, exchange and consumption, including those of the ‘solidarity economy.’ Defining the practice of economic solidarity is difficult, as it is something that is ‘in motion.’ In the case study I shall discuss from Mercado Bonpland, members of one cooperative described it as ‘a diversity and multiplicity of attempts’ to create alternative economic possibilities within the current system (la Asambleaaria, n.d.). This plural approach is processual, encouraging experimentation rather than prescriptively demanding one approach. Creatively testing possibilities in order to learn therefore takes precedence over the attempt to define practice or to develop systematic rules (Fontecoba, 2013). Economic solidarity is consequently a broad banner under which markets can organise in a variety of ways, without the need to exclude approaches or start with ‘the answer’ to capitalist social relations.

As well as being pluralistic and processual, the solidarity economy is built on the twin foundations of inequality (exacerbated by crisis) and everyday needs. It thus allows a plurality of groups to organise around the basic necessities of daily life, often in a way that creates a degree of overlap as different groups create different ‘answers’ to the same needs and experiences. In this way, antagonism helps to think through the way that the economy is built through diversity and plurality, as forms of strategic response to the exigencies of the moment. Temporally, as I shall argue, these experiments emerge out of present crisis, but are also part of a prefigurative practice that is aware of both past history and future opportunities, and continually alert to the possibility of curtailment and enclosure. I begin by contextualising these ideas in the context of the history and organising of Palermo from which the Mercado Bonpland was created.

### **From the streets to the market: A brief history of Mercado Bonpland**

This research examines a small neighbourhood ‘solidarity economy’ market in Palermo Viejo, located in the north east of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA). Mercado Bonpland is situated in a wealthy suburb, where it is surrounded by restaurants, television studios, and many middle class shops. It houses 17 stalls, each representing an organisation, with a different approach to developing economic and social relationships. The Mercado was inaugurated at the suggestion of the Self-Organised Neighbours of Palermo Viejo Assembly (Asamblea de Vecinos Autoconvacados de Palermo Viejo), one of a series of neighbourhood assemblies, which became heavily involved in grassroots politics after the financial crisis, along with a host of other similar bodies and protest movements. By the winter of 2002, the Assembly had occupied an abandoned bank headquarters, part of a network of occupied public spaces in the city (Mauro and Rossi, 2013: 6). Later that year, the Assembly organised a political-cultural festival, ‘La Trama,’ by which time they had decided that one of their central objectives was ‘the articulation of neighbourhood ties to solidarity and social-productive projects’ (Mauro and Rossi, 2013: 7). In contrast with their earlier tactics of occupation, they negotiated with the local state to obtain formal rights of access to a public space in order to enable organisation of a market, eventually settling on the site of the abandoned Mercado Bonpland in Palermo. They were granted permission on condition that the Assembly constituted itself an official legal entity, and so the ‘Assembly of Palermo Viejo Civic Association’ was formed.

Having established itself in the spaces surrounding and behind Mercado Bonpland, the Assembly began an outdoor market under the name ‘La Trama.’ This then became the basis for other socio-productive projects such as the Unemployed Workers’ Movements (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados, MTD) of La Juanita and Solano



(Mauro and Rossi, 2013: 8). The Assembly continued to work with the local Ministry of Production, eventually becoming a recognised institutional actor in its negotiations with the state at local administration and national level, which included signing an agreement to use part of the market for fair trade projects (Mauro and Rossi, 2013: 8). This relationship of part-cooperation, part-contestation with the local state distinguished the Palermo Viejo Assembly from other local assemblies, who refused to be involved with state actors in any way. The tension was demonstrated in the organising around the national election in April 2003: ‘Palermo Viejo assembly [co-]organized the “Q.S.V.T Carnival” (Get Rid of Them All Carnival),’ yet most members also voted in the general election whereas, in other projects, like the Cid (Asamblea Popular Cid Campeador (Campeador Popular Assembly)), voting was boycotted (Mauro and Rossi, 2013: 8). With the election of the centre-left Peronist party to power in 2003, many of the Assembly’s demands, including economic solidarity initiatives, became central government policy. The Assembly itself was no longer meeting regularly by 2006, but many of the organisers in the assembly continued by working in different networks and projects in Mercado Bonpland.

In 2007, organisers of the market established themselves within the traditional market building, Mercado Bonpland. This was only possible due to the long-term organising of the assembly, with neighbours and various collaborations with other assemblies and movements in the neighbourhood and across the city. It was also contingent on negotiation with the local state administration and legally establishing the assembly as an association. This tactic of negotiation with local administration alongside neighbours and assemblies was different from other assemblies. Special mobilisations were required in 2007 and 2010, when the government tried to shut the market down (field notes, 25 June 2013), requiring political activation of a network of activists and neighbours to maintain this space. The legacy of the Palermo Viejo assembly was the formation, subsequent defence, maintenance and evolution of Mercado Bonpland. The physical space of the retail market, its central location in the neighbourhood and mostly reduced rental contributions, have created a stability for many of the organisations, that has enabled them to focus on development of producers. A relatively secure physical space, enabled the groups within the market to focus on production and improving production conditions, strengthening networks and changing consumption. The marketspace itself was therefore essential to allow the development of the other values within the market. A combination of organisation, resistance and cooperation have characterised the relationship with local state actors, including politicians, administrative figures, and various institutions, a process requiring long-term and repeated processes of negotiation to establish the urban space of the market.

## **Method**

The research on which this study is based was conducted across a number of trips between 2013 and 2016. A combination of ethnographic participant observation (Wacquant, 2010), field diaries and 36 qualitative interviews (an initial 30 in 2013 and 2014, and then a further 6 in 2016) was used to determine which alternative economic practices were still in use at the market during this time, and to suggest the direction of collective travel in terms of organisational practices, aims and political debates. These interviews focused on the changes that had been occurring in the market, organisational necessities, aims, challenges and everyday practices. Taken at the end of a research trips, the interviews were a chance to build on and clarify developments that I had seen taking place. Each new trip, these findings could be fed back, verified and built on in the following trip, in order to gain a more complete picture of the everyday life and aims of the market. The interview data and fieldnotes were then

analysed to draw out crucial themes across the different market stalls and to determine change over time (Jackson, 2001). A key limitation of the research, was undertaking the interviews and discussions within the market itself. Stall holders were often busy with day to day activities, and discussions would be broken by conversations with others in the market. This undoubtedly changed the topics we spoke about, but this gave insights into the everyday methods, conversations and tactics of stallholders themselves.

I developed research themes from this analysis, which focused on the ways in which organising the economy from below was a daily practice for stallholders at Bonpland, as they continually negotiated challenges from both capital and national state policies. The solutions that different stallholders and collectives found were not always entirely consistent with one another, an effect of the constant need to innovate and adapt which heightened the creative provisionality of many of their solutions (Simone, 2018). In the analysis that follows, I have tried to retain a sense of both the plurality of approach and the creative informality and temporal boundedness of many of these practices, to reflect a process of economic development that could change from day to day. The results may initially appear to be somewhat snapshot-like and haphazard, but this is very much a function of the fact that the response from the stallholders was, in many cases, mobile, transient, and open to further innovation, in response to the need to create new solutions to exploitative conditions.

### **‘Looking for alternatives’: Representing contradiction and antagonism in the Mercado Bonpland**

Basically when everything was a mess in Argentina we begun a logic of looking for alternatives, and one of them was what we call ‘fair trade’ [or] ‘responsible consumption.’ We then got organised under the co-operative legal figure. Why under this figure? Because we think the capitalist market due to its cyclic character creates exclusions, and we don’t want to create more exclusions – we want to work in a more organised way. (Juan, 23 April 2014)

As Juan, a trader at one of the stalls, explained, for many of those involved, Mercado Bonpland represented a space that was intended to overcome the suffering caused by the cyclical crises of the capitalist market. His use of the term ‘exclusions’ refers both to a lack of employment opportunities on the side of production, and to the inability to purchase basic goods and services that resulted from the crisis in Argentina, pointing to the way that it deepened the contradictions between those who benefit and those who lose from the current economic system. By contrast, the solidarity economy is here represented as a source of community resilience, with ‘fair trade’ creating opportunities for dignified work that are consciously presented antagonistically, as an alternative to capitalist social and economic relations, with recent experiences of the suffering caused by the debt crisis very much in mind. Autogestive projects are represented oppositionally as more stable, more fair and more ‘organised’ than the ‘mess’ within the status quo which led to the Argentine crisis. This view was widely shared by the producers and networks behind other market stalls, which included family farms (Coopertiva Agropeccuria Florencio Varela and CECOPAF), networks of cooperatives (La Asambleaaria, Cooperativa Red del Campo and Colectivo Solidario), projects to support social movement activities (Yo No Fui and MP La Dignidad) and artisans (Soncko, Puchi and Ayri support). These collectives had been forced to innovate and develop new networks in order to continue production through the crisis period.

In the same interview, Juan recognised tensions between the production side of the Mercado Bonpland and the needs of poorer consumers. Avoiding exploitation by demanding a fair price for good work could lead to the pricing-out of other people from the market, who are instead forced to purchase cheaply produced, lower quality commodities:

I work a lot with popular<sup>1</sup> sectors and we can't compete on price. There is such inequality that a person understands and says, yes, look ... I can't pay it, even people who come from the same place as producers: I can't afford it and I have to consume the other thing, which I know is crap because they burn gas, they put agrochemicals on it, but what can I do? It is a form of impotence, but it is a matter of a process, right? (Juan, 23 April 2014)

The risk here is that the solidarity economy doesn't address the division between those who are paid the full value of their labour and who can therefore afford to purchase a better quality of goods at a higher price, and those who are not and who are therefore condemned to take risks. The 'solidarity' within solidarity economics sometimes breaks down at the boundary with the capitalist system, where contradictions, inequalities and cyclical crisis continue to impact everyday life. However, framing this issue in temporal terms suggests an alternative interpretation: at the current juncture, the economics of Mercado Bonpland represent a limited alternative to a wider capitalist economic context. While it is important to acknowledge the compromise, such innovations nonetheless leave room for the development of an alternative logic that is self-consciously opposed to that of competitive capitalism. It is also an aim of the economic solidarity movement to create further opportunities to reach more producers, allowing a greater number to benefit from improved conditions. Just because economic solidarity has not solved all of the exclusions and inequalities of capital at one fell swoop does not mean that it does not represent a progressive alternative on which to build.

The aim of many of the organisations in Mercado Bonpland is to create a process through which they can work with producers and consumers to improve conditions for everyone involved, as Nicolas, one of the stall holders, explained:

We all benefit, more or less, depending on which side of the counter or shovel you are on. The producer benefits, because he can sell his products, but also because he gets a bag of sugar at a fantastic cost. Here we have cheese of the best quality, so I will buy no others, and I myself benefit with the product. The public participate because there is no public as a separate audience. I tell the people "If you have some time you must do something" and some come and weigh their products – they help us. Because you are also consumers and producers, you produce something. If people say "No, I don't produce anything", I say "Yes, you use Microsoft Windows, you are producing something. Let's see how can you help". (Nicolas, 15 April 2014)

Nicolas' description of the interconnections between the roles of producer, consumer, and worker highlights the way in which he sees the Mercado in terms of a process of change that is inclusive. Divisions between workers and consumers break down, in favour of a vision in which everyone works together to improve the environment on behalf of all. This change of roles also suggests alternative ideas and ways of actively producing the economy for the collective good. The approach does not entirely prevent inequality, but focuses on creating better conditions and resources for all involved, in order to generate independence from mainstream options. In this sense, the creation of different social relationships strategically changes the way that the networks of producers and consumers organise and act in response to national and international economic challenges.

A particularly interesting example of a solidarity response to global economic speculation occurred in 2012, around the production of mate, a popular herbal tea that is an everyday necessity in Argentina. Luciana, a stallholder from one of the cooperative organisations in the market La Asamblearia, explained that the largest and most powerful tea producers had organised themselves to fix prices by engineering a scarcity crisis, during which they spread a false news story that poor harvests had restricted supply (field diary, 25 June 2013). Mate vanished from shelves throughout Buenos Aires, but the Mercado Bonpland was an exception because La Asamblearia had developed relationships with co-operatively run mate producers, and therefore had a steady and secure supply that did not depend on the big farmers. This placed members of the cooperative under a series of intense pressures from the capitalist system: firstly, to raise prices in order to make greater profits, and secondly, to sell large quantities to consumers frequenting the Mercado.

Recognising that speculation was a result of a capitalist logic that increased the concrete contradictions in society by exacerbating inequality, those involved in the cooperative developed an alternative means to tackle the crisis. Despite the shortage, the not-for-profit ethos of the market prevailed, and producers and market stall sellers together decided that they would not raise prices (field diary, 25 June 2013). This was represented as a self-conscious, considered departure from established practice, the deliberate choice of a different logic, the enactment of which actualised a defiant and resistant alternative. Similarly, when some customers began to request large quantities of mate due to the crisis, Luciana refused to sell it to them, on the basis that 'this sort of consumption was either to make a profit, or to accumulate the mate for themselves' (field diary, 25 June 2013). The market sellers therefore only sold mate to people in the local community, people they knew, or those buying a few other things in the shop. Through such means, Bonpland was able to sell mate to a wide range of consumers when most of the rest of the city had run out, but was also able to create and to display a logic and a set of values that ran counter to those of hegemonic capitalist exploitation.

By recognising the contradictions inherent within capitalism and moving to ameliorate them by developing antagonistic alternatives, producers and stallholders balanced their individual interests against those of a wider collective, in a way that challenged narratives of profit and sale to the highest bidder. The continuing supply of mate to the market, alongside the sometimes challenging global market organisation highlight the in process creation of different values within the solidarity economy. These were necessarily antagonistic to speculation and focused on developing producer and consumer relations. Yet, this example also shows that the in process development of these networks, means they do not include everyone. Yet, the continued focus on improving production, producers working with the market could collectively choose their response, on their own terms. The logic of the solidarity economy – the emphasis on supporting a local community and sharing resources rather than competing for them – is not merely economically alternative, but also offers a completely different picture of social and economic relations from the competitive pursuit of self-interest that is assumed to be the essence of human nature under capitalism. In terms of relations with producers, this stresses the need to think beyond the present and to plan sustainably for the future. Many of the organisations in Mercado Bonpland worked with small-scale producers to understand and support their practice, and this support and network organising also developed stronger social ties, as Luciana explained:

they [small agricultural producers] have the objective to be organic but are not organic at the start. We support them anyway, because the people working there, they work as we do. Always

the aim is becoming friends. Do you need something? Can we help you? It always ends in a friendship. (Luciana, 16 July 2013)

Refusing the assertion that people operate only from their own self-interest, the Mercado offers a deliberately and defiantly antagonistic model in order to create economic alternatives, as a more altruistic and caring model of human cooperation. This is based on building strong relationships between producers, market stallholders and consumers, based on support, work, help and trust.

In another similar case of global market speculation, one co-operative supported producers who stopped producing quinoa, because its value was being unduly inflated in response to global demand. This meant during 2014 there was no quinoa to sell, despite it being a popular product with consumers. The producers' fear was that the higher commodity values, and higher sales values would tie them into an unsustainable boom-and-bust speculation model, leading to a collapse of demand and of producer profits when the inflated value decreased (and suffering amongst ordinary consumers in the meantime). These producers did not want to tie themselves into this system, and instead preferred to produce potatoes, a crop with a lower sales price, but which allowed producers greater freedom while also feeding consumers. They could continue consuming the products they grew, as well as exchanging them with other local producers and selling to the market, and consumers were not priced out of a staple food. As in the example with the mate, above, the cooperative countered the capitalist logic of short-term gain in the exchange of fetishized commodities with an emphasis on longer-term sustainability which recognised the fundamental social relations underlying a sales transaction. While they could not alter the larger scale patterns of speculation driven by global community food prices, they were able to find workable alternatives.

Across almost all of the seventeen stalls in Mercado Bonpland, the producers set the prices based on the costs involved in production, and to ensure that they had a dignified work. These costings were supported by the networks and market organisers, who helped producers to decide what was fair. Prices were often decided at special producer assemblies (La Asambleria and Colectivo Solidario used this method). Furthermore, some stalls added a small percentage (2–4%) to prices to create a fund which the network could use to improve workers' conditions, with investments also decided at an assembly. For example, in 2014 the Colectivo Solidario bought some small farmers and producers a solar dryer, so that they could dry and save vegetables, enabling them to create new products (dried herb soups) to be sold throughout the year. These pricing structures helped the process of production, while avoiding speculation, as Juan explained:

[the cooperative] operate the price structure, under values – which is fixed, we don't speculate, don't get out the merchandise. For example we have tomatoes here that we could increase the price of a lot. (Juan, 16 July 2013)

These pricing structures mean that whilst the market is not the cheapest source of food, as discussed earlier, it is also not the most expensive. The avoidance of speculation acts as a stabilising force, and whilst the popular classes 'can't afford it and have to consume the other thing' (Juan, 23 April 2014, above), a percentage of the cost of products to the consumer is used to fund the development of autogestive projects with the aim of improving quality of life for all involved. Consequently, the money from selling these foods is based on a compromise between fair prices and conditions for producers and the production of



healthy food for consumers, in a way that recognises not only the interdependence of the two groups, but their equivalence (producers in one area becoming consumers in another).

Despite organising to progress dignified work and better production conditions for producers and consumers involved in Mercado Bonpland, the market still sometimes came under attack as it did not donate food for free. As Diego, a stallholder in the market, explained:

Some say: why don't you organise "Fruit for everyone", "Yerba [mate] for everyone". No, that would mean bread for today and hunger tomorrow. They told us we could sell subsidised yerba. For example, one time a different group brought a truck to Mendoza with subsidised Yerba, they sold it for half the price that the co-operatives from Misiones charged, and the public in Mendoza had cheap yerba once. Our people selling yerba in Mendoza were furious because the programme sold yerba cheaper than them... (Diego, 1 November 2013)

Diego, had previously been a representative of 'Foro Nacional de Agricultura Familiar' (a family agriculture movement) which brought together more than 1000 family farmers in 2001. The importance of this group meant that he subsequently became a Minister for Family Agriculture in the National Government, a post that was created as a response to the strength of the mobilisations after 2001. His position meant that he took on a triple role: firstly, he was part of agricultural movements; secondly he helped create opportunities for equitable sales through organising in Mercado Bonpland; thirdly, he shaped and responded to national government policy through the Ministry. This triple role highlights the complexities of engaging in and strategising around and developing power to act. An essential organising strategy was to use these different roles to negotiate and intervene, for those involved in the market. In the quotation above, he highlights how market-led approaches are sometimes in tension with charitable efforts to ameliorate conditions for the poorest: in this example, subsidised 'help' made it difficult for local cooperative producers to compete, potentially forcing them out of business. At the same time, a one-off handout is unsustainable as part of a longer term strategy, not just for producers but also for consumers ('bread for today and hunger tomorrow'). A longer-term view not only allows workers to farm more sustainably and to plan for the longer term, but also conduces to the stability of prices, which not only helps to even out production and to prevent unnecessary consumer suffering, but also to replace the denuded social relations of capitalist commodity exchange with networks that are fundamentally humanising in nature.

For Diego, the pursuit of these long-term goals was fundamentally linked to the need for improved everyday working conditions:

We need to dignify work, and it is dignified by working under worthy conditions, which must be obtained by every worker, through each enterprise, and the state must be in support of that. (Diego, 1 November 2013)

The use of 'dignity' as a key term to express this struggle humanises it, reinserting values into debates about the organisation of labour, and making this a question of fairness and justice, rather than supply and demand. It emphasises both that individuals were claiming something that should be automatically their due (as opposed, say, to charitable handouts), and also the need for something 'more than a job' to make work both safe and rewarding. It exerts a claim not just on employers, but on consumers themselves, to recognise their part in challenging the labour relations that lie buried underneath commodity fetishism where they are able.



A fundamental challenge of creating an alternative economy market is to facilitate sales whilst changing conditions of production and consumption. Products are still important for Bonpland: it is still fundamentally a place where people shop, but sales are not the main focus for market stallholders. During my interviews, I asked the members of the market about the overall focus of the organisation, and their answers highlighted the many and varied methods that they used for creating an alternative economy. Most focused on changing the conditions of production, rather than products, as Nicolas from *la Asamblearia* emphasised:

It is confidence. Confidence and supporting people. Behind a person you can put products, or create new ones, or see how to integrate products. The product is something strong but secondary. (Nicolas, 25 April 2014)

This emphasises the need for supportive and collaborative networks of production over socially denuded products. Consumers buy local, seasonal, producer-led products connected to producer-led movements (occupied factories, artisans and other forms of ‘alternative production’), yet they need not be involved with these movements to shop in Mercado Bonpland. The products do, however, lead them to recognise alternative forms of consumption that are responsive to seasonality and producer welfare. Mercado Bonpland therefore attempts to address the circulation process of producer, product, commodity, value and exchange, which are altered through the processes of experiment, collectively, reflection and change.

Part of the strategy that the market employed was to support workers to create more dignified conditions through exchange of labour for a fair wage. The fact that workers at the Mercado were in receipt of a wage led to some criticism from outside of the market, and consequently workers had to explain the need for wages in order to avoid self-exploitation as well as exploitation of producers and consumers. Therefore, wages were part of a way of becoming more self-reliant and strategic:

This auto-exploitation is common in all social organisations, but they can’t see it, they don’t realise it. They believe to make a social ‘work’ you must be poor, you must go poor, you need a subsidy, crying at Social Development to be supported on this or that. We support each other, so we must have a system where everyone is paid for his work. (Diego, 1 November 2013).

Coexisting with capitalism, while simultaneously endeavouring to challenge its most fundamental presuppositions, requires that individuals should earn money. The difference between this and an ordinary wage is that it produces some additional social goods, such as a network of producers. The struggle for dignified work within the current economic system means that conditions are often changed incrementally: the creation of a sustainable autogestion network is not something that happens overnight. However, by remaining mindful of the contradiction inherent in capitalist organisation, and pursuing a strategy that endeavours to resolve those antagonisms, new work relations can emerge.

## **Implications of everyday antagonising in Mercado Bonpland**

Working from an awareness of the contradictions of capital, and then developing antagonistic strategies to heal or highlight the damage that they cause, was a central tactic of those involved in the Mercado Bonpland. The analysis above suggests that cooperative practices within an economics of solidarity can play a fundamental role in drawing attention to the

social relations underlying labour, becoming simultaneously both a practical and a theoretical tool of resistance.

The case of Mercado Bonpland and the organising of production movements, represent diverse economies which illuminate possibilities for arranging economic relations differently, in a way that recognises the needs of both producers and consumers. As such, alternative economic spaces use their resources of 'potencia' to work with, but also to challenge or move against forms of power-over, or 'poder.' By highlighting the contradictions that are foundational to capitalism, and then antagonistically producing relationships that are more equal and more fair, they produce a space for dignified and diverse work in the interstices of the capitalist system, thus challenging 'capital-o-centric' hegemony (Gibson-Graham, 1996). Furthermore, they represent a resource that can be used now, in the present, to challenge the workings of capital, raising awareness of its creation of inequality and suggesting an alternative direction for the future (Dalla Costa and James, 1975).

Drawing on examples of antagonistic practices from Mercado Bonpland shows the tactics of organising strategic alliances and antagonistic strategies across several different and situated social relationships. One example of this is Diego's triple representative role for claiming power, as representative of agricultural movements, secondly in Mercado Bonpland and thirdly, through his role in Ministry of family agriculture. This hybrid set of roles meant different and contested negotiations day to day. The compromise and antagonisms inherent in combining these roles are a key strategy for moving onward, embedded in-against-and-beyond the current social relations that organise the market and producer relations each day. Crucially, some organisations and individuals in Mercado Bonpland, as in this example created more possibilities, through developing knowledge, strategies and opportunities through engaging with and changing existing power structures. In particular, through creating new forms of organisation to represent groups that had previously not organised together – such as family farming, and through engaging in strategies of temporal disruption.

In highlighting the antagonisms of an everyday life approach, and the inherent continuing challenges that this poses, is not to undermine the work of the market. Instead it highlights that rather than existing outside of capitalist social relations, market stall holders seek to create alternatives whilst they are embedded in existing realities. In recognising that market stall holders and producers are aware of these antagonisms, it highlights the agency and strategy with which they continue their economic organising. The snapshots of cases in Mercado Bonpland examine the plurality of economic approaches in process and there sometimes antagonistic responses. The example of Juan and his aims to improve production conditions in process, are one such example of a crucial tactic in these antagonistic approaches. Rather than being able to address every problem concurrently, the changing and in process approach of autogestive projects, means that problems can be approached selectively. This highlights the long temporal organising strategies of the market, for engaging with producers and making more opportunities. Such a long term perspective that can take account for antagonistic relationships, successes and setbacks is therefore crucial for these economic strategies. Recognising challenges of this organising, as everyday antagonisms, highlights the strategy of market stall holders themselves.

Finally, it is important to note that this type of resistance takes place at the level of ordinary life and everyday practice. Small and necessary gestures, such as the consumption of food, become imbued with a wider series of social and economic relations, showing that even the most mundane transactions can become a vehicle for a politics of possibility. This research shows that everyday antagonising is not only a crucial method of organising from diverse economic frameworks, but also a means for small neighbourhood organising

movements to create new possibilities by revealing the logic of capitalism, and countering it with an alternative and more dignified series of relationships.

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### Note

1. Popular in this sense refers to popular sectors, and popular power. ‘Popular’ is used in Argentina to emphasise the capacity and agency of marginalised peoples and to position them as actors in their own lives; it also highlights the large scale of the popular sector. In particular, this definition moves away from descriptions which reproduce notions of charity and emphasises the way in which popular producers are distinguished from large-scale forms of production, with which they cannot normally compete in terms of price.

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