Cooperative Entrepreneurialism and Entrepreneurial Discourses: Everyday Neoliberal Logic in a State-sponsored Cooperative in Provincial Argentina

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Latin American 'Pink Tide' governments and neoliberal market policies has been a topic of research across academic fields. Yet more empirical, ethnographically grounded research is needed on how neoliberalism shifts from being a reigning economic doctrine to a naturalized, common-sense logic, and how that logic operates among the masses within a socio-political environment intent on resisting neoliberalism. This article contributes to filling that gap. It explores the concept of neoliberalism as an everyday logic that manifests itself through an entrepreneurial discourse in a small state-sponsored cooperative in Santiago del Estero, North-western Argentina. Specifically, it analyses a) the relationship between a cooperative created by a state-regulated employment programme and the logic of neoliberalism; b) how understandings of entrepreneurialism serve as conveyers of the logic; and c) how the entrepreneurial discourse becomes normalized in the cooperative members' narratives and self-representations and reflects in the making of their entrepreneurial selves. The article argues that neoliberalism-as-logic has become a guiding principle of and the engine behind popularly shared imaginaries and discourses of entrepreneurialism. That logic harbours a pursuit of freedom and self-governance, which makes 'being entrepreneurial' such a seductive way to understand and represent oneself.

ABSTRACTA

La relación entre los gobiernos de la 'Ola Rosa' latinoamericana y las políticas neoliberales del mercado ha sido tema de investigación en diversos campos académicos. Sin embargo, son necesarias más investigaciones empíricas basadas en métodos etnográficos en cómo el neoliberalismo pasa de ser una doctrina económica a una lógica naturalizada del sentido común, y cómo, al mismo tiempo, esa lógica opera entre las masas dentro de un ambiente sociopolítico que pretende resistir lo neoliberal. Este artículo contribuye a llenar ese vacío. Se explora el concepto de neoliberalismo como una lógica cotidiana que se manifiesta a través de un discurso emprendedor en una cooperativa estatal, ubicada en Santiago del Estero, Noroeste de

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Argentina. En particular, se analiza: a) la relación entre una cooperativa creada por un programa público de inserción laboral y el neoliberalismo como una lógica del sentido común; b) cómo los discursos políticos y populares sobre la emprendeduría canalizan ese discurso, y c) cómo el discurso emprendedor se naturaliza en las narrativas y auto-representaciones de las cooperativistas y se refleja en la construcción de su 'self emprendedor'. El artículo arguye que neoliberalismo-como-lógica es un factor constitutivo y, a su vez, el motor detrás de los imaginarios y discursos populares de la emprendeduría. Esa lógica alberga una búsqueda de libertad y autonomía, lo cual hace que 'ser emprendedor' sea una manera tan seductora de auto-representarse y entenderse.

INTRODUCTION

La Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero ('The Integral Cooperative of Santiago del Estero', from here on the Cooperativa) is a small cooperative in the city of Santiago del Estero, the capital city of a province by the same name, in North-Western Argentina. Its members produce and sell wooden decorations and household items, such as napkin holders, photo frames, jewellery boxes, and so on. The Cooperativa was founded in 2012, under the aegis of a federal labour insertion programme called Argentina Trabaja (AT). The aim of the programme was to incentivize unemployed or low-paid informal workers to set up cooperatives and through them, enter formal labour markets.

The first time I visited the Cooperativa was in January 2017, on a day when already at 10 am, the digital thermometer in the city's main square was marking 35°C. I was accompanied by Teresa, the president of the Cooperativa. The Cooperativa's workshop was in a dusty neighbourhood in the city's periphery, and it took us a good 30 minutes to drive there in an old truck. From the outside, the workshop looked like a white-washed concrete building that could have been a rural health centre as much as a school or a jail. Perhaps to avoid confusion, there was a sign on the building's wall indicating its purpose: La Cooperativa Integral de Santiago del Estero. Ministerio del Desarrollo Social (Ministry of Social Development)- Argentina Trabaja.

Inside, there were about ten women working at two large tables, their wood filing, painting, and cutting accompanied by cheerful chatter. All kinds of materials, from plywood to paints and tools, were piled in shelves and cupboards the women themselves had made. While two fans did a sorry job in circulating the air inside, thick concrete walls spared the interior from the worst of the heat outside. Without yet knowing it at the time, during the following ten months, I would become a regular visitor there. I would observe and interview the members, and participate in the usual tasks such as painting, cleaning, serving *mate*[1] and so on. I would learn to use the wood-cutting machinery under the members' observing eyes, some of whom seemed like they had been born to use, say, a lathe. Gradually, the workers grew accustomed to my presence, finding it rather amusing that a foreign anthropologist was so keen on understanding why they worked in a cooperative and how the Cooperativa itself worked.

For a scholar researching entrepreneurialism[2] and social mobility, the Cooperativa was an intriguing ethnographic site. It offered a micro window into how ideas of entrepreneurialism, collaborative work, and social mobility intersected and were discussed within the macro framework of a federal employment programme. But it quickly became apparent that the Cooperativa also served as an interesting case study of how the logic of neoliberalism can permeate environments of economic production that are seemingly meant to resist that very logic. The cooperative model is, after all, about collectively shared ownership and horizontally spread management of production that defies the capitalist model of private ownership over means of production. Although the Cooperativa was part of and controlled by Argentina Trabaja, internally, it was run based on collaborative management, a horizontal organizational structure, and shared production-remuneration. Yet in tandem, it was also a site marked by articulations of agency and aspirations for autonomy and self-governance; a site that produced and was produced by an ongoing discourse of entrepreneurialism. As such, it also framed the making of entrepreneurial identities (Freeman 2014).

This article is an account of the making of those identities. Moreover, it offers an analysis of how the concept of neoliberalism has turned into an everyday logic that underpins popular attitudes and worldviews and gives shape to a widely shared entrepreneurial discourse. The analysis stems from data I collected during my weekly visits in the Cooperativa during 2017, when I was conducting multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Santiago. During my visits, besides participating in the activities, I conversed with the members and subsequently wrote notes on those conservations. 12 interviews were recorded. In addition to spending time in the Cooperativa, I also accompanied few members to

occupational and finance related workshops meant for AT participants as well as to artisanal fares where the Cooperativa participated. These two served as excellent places to observe how in 'cooperative spirit,' one was taught to be entrepreneurial, on one hand, and how being 'cooperatively entrepreneurial' translated into small-scale business activity, on the other.

In the following pages, I focus on how the neoliberal logic best manifests itself as an entrepreneurial discourse, a discourse that inhabits the Cooperativa workers' narratives about their trajectories and ambitions. In Argentina, common vocabularies have become rife with terms that explicitly or implicitly point to the pervasiveness of entrepreneurialism as a concept, practice, and aspiration. As I will show, those vocabularies, generated and disseminated by larger public and political discourses, also reveal the extent to which shared imaginaries of entrepreneurialism can shape one's sense of self. In doing so, I borrow from Pierre Dardot and Cristian Laval, whose explanation of entrepreneurialism is as clear as it is concise:

> [Entrepreneurialism] is no longer so much a question of the specific function of the entrepreneur in the economic process, as of the entrepreneurial faculty as it exists in every subject; the subject's capacity to become an entrepreneur in the various aspects of his life, even to be the entrepreneur of his existence. In short, it is a question of doing what is required for everyone to become as 'enterprising' as possible (Dardot and Laval 2013, 134).

I use ethnographic material from my research to illustrate how personal narratives and conversations in the Cooperativa imbue the abstract idea of entrepreneurialism with meaning. This idea does not only reflect in the workers' self-representations but also in how they negotiate their lives between the relatively restrictive cooperative work and their future aspirations and quest to become (economically) autonomous.

I begin by discussing the concept of neoliberalism and its mutability: how it has seeped into our everyday lives as a rationale or a culture of sorts without necessarily losing its core meaning as a political economic doctrine. I aim to demonstrate that while these two cannot be separated from one another, it is important to focus on the kinds of bottom-up mentalities and discourses that reflect the top-down institutional policies and how these, in turn, frame the cultural neoliberalisation of socioeconomic aspirations (Hilgers 2013). I will therefore discuss the labour insertion programme, Argentina Trabaja, and how the cooperatives under its aegis were designed and how they operated in practice. I argue that although AT indeed was an important element in the process to develop the Kirchnerist politics of 'social economy,' it also ended up setting a (cooperative) scene for developing and disseminating popular entrepreneurial ideologies and discourses. The ethnographic section delves into the latter point through my interlocutors' narratives concerning their views on the Cooperativa, their self-understandings, and their future hopes and dreams. Importantly, this article does not question the destructive, inequality-conducive effects that neoliberal policies have had and continue to have on the Argentine (and global) socioeconomic makeup. Instead, it aims to foreground the paradoxical sociocultural perpetuation of the neoliberal normativity. That normativity – the everyday logic – gains traction as top-down neoliberal policies are recycled by those whom the policies most detrimentally affect, and then redirected – but not necessarily changed – for purposes of subsistence and resistance against socioeconomic marginalization (cf. Gago 2017).

THE NEOLIBERAL LOGIC

The protean concept of neoliberalism has an uncanny 'capacity to resist synthesis' (Hibou and Samuel 2011, 14 cited in Hilgers 2013, 81). This means that after incalculable cycles of recycling, it may run the risk of becoming an 'empty signifier that explains everything and nothing' (Gambetti and Godoy-Anativia 2013, 4). Still, students of economic inequality and socioeconomic stratification keep returning to it. For its elusiveness notwithstanding, the concept can serve as a gold mine for discovering and analyzing the tectonic forces that drive socioeconomic change (Medina-Zárate and Uchôa de Oliveira 2019). Recognizing the concept's malleability, in this article I theorize and approach neoliberalism as a form of everyday logic and a rationale, which gives birth to diverse, popularly internalized discourses.[3] As a cultural, quotidian logic, it has its roots in institutionalized and practical political-economic pursuit of economic growth based on market freedom. An oft-cited definition of neoliberalism given by David Harvey is revelatory in explaining what the roots of the popularized neoliberal logic are. He writes:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (2005: 2)

'The institutional frame of free markets and free trade' beckons towards the macrolevel of governmental

agendas and global regulation of trade –in short, a globally understood political economic doctrine. Further, unleashing the powers of entrepreneurial freedom in the neoliberal sense, then, tends to imply doing business in those globalized, capitalist markets that are at least partially free(d) from state regulation (Plehwe et. al. 2019). But this latter idea, as expressed in Harvey's definition, can also be extended to the sociocultural spheres of everyday human experience. In those spheres, 'liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms' can convert into the belief that entrepreneurialism among individuals maximises the chances to attain not capital but personal autonomy, which, in turn, implies experiencing individual wellbeing (Freeman 2014). This shows that striving toward autonomy coupled with ideals of freedom and wellbeing –the neoliberal logic– is deeply entrenched in our cultural psyche. It inhabits not only political and public discourses but also, on a microlevel, our daily narratives and conversations.

The seductiveness of the everyday neoliberal logic is hard to miss. It conceals an alluring promise of freedom that transcends the freedom associated with economic affairs and markets. Nikolas Rose (1999) argues that, while ideals of freedom regulate neoliberal modes of governing, they also complicate the traditionally linear, top-down relationship between the state (the governing power) and the citizen (the governed). Liberal techniques of governance mobilize the illusion that individuals are free and autonomous consumers, producers, and political agents; indeed, entrepreneurs of their own fate and wellbeing (ibid.). But what happens when there is an ideologically founded political attempt to change or reverse those liberal techniques of governance? I suggest that the evolution of neoliberal models of political and economic control into popularized imaginaries of freedom, autonomy, and individualism can resist political attempts to eradicate, or to simply challenge, neoliberalism as a principle for political economy. Thus, while e.g., ideologically post-neoliberal political forces may reject instrumentalizing neoliberalism as a policy approach, the popularized neoliberal rationale with its core ideas of individual freedom can stay intact. Based on my data, on the grassroots level of how people act and what they say, this can translate into an enterprising mentality striving above all towards individual autonomy and growth.

The 'Pink Tide' in Latin America in the first decade of 2000 exemplifies how a relatively rapid shift from right-wing neoliberal politics to leftist agenda cannot so easily rid itself from the prevailing neoliberal culture. The surge of leftist governments across the region was heralded as the onset of a 'post-neoliberal' era (Bonnet 2016; Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012; Wylde 2015; c.f. MacDonald and Ruckert 2009). The transition from the time of structural reforms in the 1980s and 1990s to state-regulated economic policies in the 2000s for instance in Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina was seen as a triumph of the counterhegemonic (Chodor 2015; Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012). Other voices, however, warned against the assumption that a shift to the left in political leadership could so easily undo the socioeconomic repercussions of more than two decades of structural adjustments in the region. According to those voices, the leftist turn simply re-configured tenets of neoliberalism. Or, minimally, it constituted a semi-alternative political economy that, while shunning away from politics of privatization, deregulation, and free markets, would still rely on politics of commodification, consumption, and resource extraction and trade (Féliz 2011; Katz 2015; Plehwe and Karin 2019; c.f. Petras and Veltmeyer 2014). The concessions the Pink Tide governments had to make regarding neoliberal market policies while also aiming for more egalitarian economic models are widely analysed across academic disciplines (Bonnet 2016; Chodor 2015; Mollo and Saad-Filho 2006; Webber 2009). But there is still space left for empirically examining how the neoliberal economic imperatives have mutated into everyday attitudes, worldviews, and forms of self-representation, even when the surrounding and reigning political ideology has bent towards the post-neoliberal.

The Kirchnerist Argentina (2003–2015) and its ideological legacy offer an excellent context for research aiming towards filling that space. Part of the Pink Tide, the rise of Nestor Kirchner to power in 2003 initiated a period of governance predicated on 'social economy,' defined as 'solidary, distributive, and democratic' (Cardelli 2017). One of the key features of the 12 years of Kirchnerismo (Nestor Kirchner 2003–2007; Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner 2007–2015) was the endeavour to rebuild the welfare state. The Kirchnerist governments designed and implemented structural changes in fields ranging from public health and education to physical infrastructure, agriculture, and so on. This led to rapid socioeconomic growth, reduced poverty, and fuelled (while also being fuelled by) social development policies and public assistance/labour incentivization programmes, such as Asignación Universal por Hijo (Universal Child Benefit), or, as discussed in this article, Argentina Trabaja. However, just as literature concerning the Pink Tide and its uneasy relationship with neoliberalism shows, the Kirchnerist socio-political conjuncture could not divorce itself entirely from the neoliberal rationale governing global commodity markets and international systems of export-import (Wylde 2015). Neither could it really change the local (and increasingly global) social realities that neoliberalism had penetrated and, in that process, converted into a popularly understood entrepreneurial 'way of the world' (Dardot and Laval 2013).

Of this, Argentina Trabaja and the cooperatives operating within the programme serve as a case in point. AT embodied the spirit of social and solidary economy by aiming, through cooperative work, to effectuate

social inclusion and horizontally distributed, local economic development. Yet at the same time, as the following shows, the cooperatives themselves could also become incubators for entrepreneurial discourse and as such, support the search for individual autonomy over collective solidarity.

COOPERATIVISM NEGOTIATED

Argentina Trabaja (AT) was created in 2009 as part of the Kirchnerist governments' agenda to increase employment and reduce the informal sector that had burgeoned after the economic collapse in 2001–2002. Its purpose was to facilitate access to formal employment through state-sponsored, locally managed cooperatives. Specifically, in doing so, AT's aim was 'to further economic activity and increase income through "communitarian organized work" and incentives to generate "local development"' (Res. 3182/09 in Pacífico 2020, 170. My translation). It was targeted at long-term unemployed individuals who were not students, pensioners, or beneficiaries of other social assistance programmes (CEPAL). At first, the programme operated in the province of Buenos Aires but by 2012, it had spread to other provinces, including Santiago del Estero.[4]

In line with AT's eligibility stipulations, most cooperatives across the country worked in low-skill fields of infrastructural maintenance and construction sector, whereas cooperatives that produced and sold goods were much less common. AT also sponsored different skill acquisition courses that tended to focus on occupational learning and which the cooperative members were expected to take. Within the programme's progressive framings, one of its most attractive features, as my interlocutors would readily acknowledge, was access to social security and pension plan that it offered, besides paying the participants a fixed baseline salary.

From the onset, that baseline salary was designed to match the national minimum income. However, it failed to keep up with the steadily increasing cost of living due to inflation, and by 2016, what AT paid was around 50% of the national minimum salary (Arcidiácono and Bermudez 2018). Nevertheless, as one of the workers in the Cooperativa, Josefa, 50, made clear, that was of less concern than the other benefits involved in the programme:

> I know [Argentina Trabaja] isn't perfect…I mean… it even exploits and the pay is shit. But look, we have *obra social* (social security) and also *aporte jubilatorio* (pension plan). That's something you obviously don't get working *en negro* (informally) and in general you're just in a precarious situation if anything happens to you or your family, if you're not inside the system.

Since its inception, Argentina Trabaja has undergone many changes, adjustments, and reconfigurations regarding its internal organization, management in practice, and its rules and regulations. In practice, these have involved e.g., the programme's territorial expansion and its local management structure. But the transformations themselves have also been tied to political changes in governance (Hopp 2017; Natalucci 2018; Pacífico 2020).[5] There is a vast body of literature in Argentina that analyses and discusses the successes and pitfalls of Argentina Trabaja (e.g., Arcidiácono et. al. 2014, De Sena and Chahbenderian 2011; Hopp 2017; Lo Vuolo 2010; Mango 2021; Ronconi and Zarazaga 2017). It is not within the scope of this article to engage in these debates and those beyond them. However, two lines of critique are relevant here: first, the relationship between the state and cooperativism; second, how employment and employability were formulated within AT.

The principle of the AT cooperatives was to 'further solidarity among the workers by generating more horizontal social relations' (De Sena and Chahbenderian 2011, 3. My translation.) What this left out was one of the central aspects of how a cooperative is defined by the International Cooperative Alliance: a cooperative is 'an *autonomous* association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations' (emphasis mine). The fact that AT and its cooperative model was designed and implemented by the state thus questioned the cooperativist philosophy of collective independence and autonomy (Arcidiácono et. al. 2014, Lo Vuolo 2010). Since its early moorings in the late 19th century, cooperativism has remained as a constant in the Argentine landscape of labour organization. It has represented an alternative to economic policies that have led to soaring unemployment and subsequent austerity measures. Most recent examples of these include the military dictatorship in 1976–1983, the period of free-market reforms in the 1990s, and the ensuing economic collapse in 2001–2002 (Plotinsky 2015). But even when cooperativism has been a labour model encouraged by the state, e.g., in the 1940s in the onset of agricultural industrialization (Mateo and Rodríguez 2019), or, indeed, during Kirchnerism after the 2002 economic debacle, it has been framed as a collective, horizontally orchestrated system of work – certainly an alternative to free-market capitalist economy (Arcidiácono et al. 2014; De Sena and Chahbenderian 2011; Montes and Ressel 2003). It follows that despite being a public programme fostering cooperative organization, AT was still an instrument of the State. Hence, the State was also a governing force within the purportedly independent internal organization of the cooperatives.

The second relevant point of critique is AT's conceptualization of un/employment. The programme was designed with a strong focus on structural development and the aim to reduce unemployment. Yet

the purpose to tackle unemployment seemed to conceal the presupposition that the targeted population was unemployed because they had not been employable to begin with (Hopp 2017; Mango 2021; Natalucci 2018). Consequentially, the idea was that through their cooperative work and with the skills acquired in different AT courses, the participants would become employable, productive agents in the formal labour markets. Thus, employment and employability were ultimately treated as individual-specific (Mate 2020; Natalucci 2018). This contained the expectation that individuals would be flexible and active seekers of opportunities as they would make use of the institutional platform to become economically productive citizens. Indirectly – and perhaps unwittingly – that institutional platform hence encouraged entrepreneurial disposition in the face of structurally restrictive labour market. Teresa, the Cooperativa's president, explained to me many of her co-workers' – though, she emphasises, not her – rationale regarding this:

> ...But we also work only half-a-day. And afterwards, many of us work *en negro*, which is necessary, and we keep our *obra social*. I know it's not permitted but you have to find ways out, you know, be creative. And the thing is, working in the cooperative is better than not working at all, right? Because who guarantees that you can get a job as a cleaner? This work is secure.

Here we begin to see how the programme builds cooperative environments that turn out to also sow and grow entrepreneurial attitudes (cf. Cardelli 2017). In that sense, the case of AT and, specifically, the Cooperativa allows us to witness how the neoliberal logic unfolds as a mutually constituted, circuitous process between institutional forces and socially spread, mobility-driven pragmatism among the masses (Gago 2017; Mango 2021).

ENTREPRENEURIALISM ARTICULATED

The popular mobility-driven pragmatism relates closely to today's globally spread imperative to be entrepreneurial (Dardot and Laval 2013; Freeman 2014). That imperative underpins the making of the entrepreneurial subjectivity through which, as Ulrich Bröckling (2016) argues, one becomes the 'entrepreneur of oneself.' Dovetailing Dardot and Laval (2013), he writes: 'The call to act as an entrepreneur of one's own life produces a model for people to understand what they are and what they ought to be, and it tells them how to work on the self in order to become what they ought to be' (2016, viii). This process links to larger socio-political circumstances in which public discourses spreading the gospel of entrepreneurship create imaginaries of achievements and, concomitantly, freedom (Cabaña and Merlo 2017; Rose 1999). Freedom to choose contains a dictum of autonomy: one can be what one wants to be by marshalling one's inner entrepreneurial force.

An excellent example of a public discourse on entrepreneurialism and its power in shaping public imaginaries is a publicity campaign launched by the City of Buenos Aires in 2015. The aim of the campaign was to promote local entrepreneurship. As part of it, the municipal government placed advertising billboards in strategic areas of the capital city. The message in the billboards was succinct: 'Achieve your dream. Dare to startup' (*Alcanzá tu sueño. Animate a emprender.*) The simplicity of the form here contains three ordinary yet evocative words – dream, achieve, dare – that hammer meaning into the key notion of starting (a business).

Social media under the same campaign slogan encouraged entrepreneurship through comparing it with 'starting a journey', 'imagining', 'find[ing] something that moves you from within', etc. (Gobierno Municipal de Buenos Aires 2015). Such associations, laced with emotions, have a powerful capacity to constitute easily divulgeable, collectively decodable imaginaries. When thickened with adjectives such as innovative, flexible, dynamic, bold (the list goes on), the imaginaries produce popular discourses in which the entrepreneur becomes synonymous of a productive agent (Dodd 2002). The Buenos Aires campaign illustrates how the idea of an entrepreneurial citizen is sutured onto wider discourses that democratize understandings of entrepreneurship. It shows how *being entrepreneurial* is not only encouraged by the State. It can also become a project of the State.[6]

How public institutions – the State – inculcate citizens with the value of being an entrepreneur and entrepreneurial becomes apparent in a workshop titled Estrategias de la Emprendeduría that I attend with Teresa, Josefa, and Nena in Santiago's Technology and Exhibition Center, Nodo Tecnológico. The workshop is organized by Plataforma Emprender, a programme that supports entrepreneurship in the province of Santiago and is a product of a collaboration between Santiago's universities (the National and the Catholic Universities), the Provincial Ministry of Production, and a private foundation called Endeavor Argentina.

In the first session, the speaker, who continuously emphasizes how important it is for young business owners to have 'entrepreneurial qualities,' puts up a slide with a header: '*¿Qué es un emprendedor?*' Point by point the animated slide reveals a list of adjectives: 'innovative,' 'courageous,' 'flexible,' 'creative,' 'determined.' Simultaneously, she unpacks the implications of each characteristic, using concrete examples to illustrate its

meaning in practice. At no point during the workshop does any of the speakers or members of the audience utter the word 'cooperative.' As we leave the workshop, I ask my companions how they relate themselves and their cooperative to the kind of ideas of entrepreneurialism promoted in the workshop and, by extension, by the provincial institutions. Josefa answers that of course their cooperative is not the kind of enterprise that most people in the audience either have or aspire to have. But that, however, does not mean that working in a cooperative makes them any less entrepreneurial than the other workshop participants. To avoid confusion, I ask whether she uses the word *emprendedora* as an adjective or a noun – the sentence, as she utters it, does not make it entirely clear. '*Y bueno, los dos*' (Well, both), she says.

ENTREPRENEURIALISM EXPERIENCED

The entrepreneur is the neoliberal citizen *par excellence* (Freeman 2007; Natanson 2016). She is flexible in her life decisions and opts for the choices that make her feel the best rather than simply earn the most. At the same time, she becomes an agent in an on-going competition of self-fulfilment. In that sense, being an entrepreneur/entrepreneurial unfolds as the most celebrated product of a meritocratic ideology that is framed by neoliberal logic (Freeman 2014).

Belén, 28, fills the abstract idea of meritocratic ideology with concreteness as she matter-of-factly says that: 'It's not like you have to do business to be entrepreneurial, it's more about what you do with your life in general, you know.' I am interviewing her in the Cooperativa, asking what she thinks about the differences or similarities between being entrepreneurial and entrepreneurship. So, she continues:

> It's like, you know, I'd say my grandparents were entrepreneurial, they wanted to have their own house and they worked in their land and had animals, and they also sold their products…For instance, I don't want to have my own business. But this cooperative we have, it teaches me a lot, I think it's about learning in a way to work for yourself, but also about working with others. Here you learn to negotiate with the others – [laughs] I'm sounding like some *business coach* [says it in English] but I guess that's also what being entrepreneurial is about.

Belén has two years left to finish her degree to become a kindergarten teacher. She worries about finding a job, but 'not too much' since while she looks for a job, she can continue working in the Cooperativa. It is ironic, she says, that it is her work in a cooperative, which she at times calls a business (*negocio*), that satisfies her desires for stability. 'Doing business is about taking risks,' she says; 'I've seen this with my parents – they have a kiosk, and let me tell you, it's not easy! So, it's a little strange that we're doing, you know, in a way, business, but we also have stability, you know, social security and all that.' To continue the conversation, I ask: 'When you graduate and start working as a *maestra* [kindergarten teacher], would you still see yourself as an entrepreneur?'

> I mean, like I said, I don't think you have to have a business to be entrepreneurial. It's complicated. [Pauses for a second] I think it's more, you know, it's more like an attitude…I think here [in the Cooperativa] I'm a *cooperativista* [cooperative worker] and an entrepreneur because although we're a cooperative, this is also an *emprendimiento* [an enterprise] and that makes us entrepreneurs, you know, literally… I general, I consider myself entrepreneurial… I have an entrepreneurial personality. Maybe when I start working as a *maestra* I won't say anymore that I'm an entrepreneur, because I anyways don't know if I am that, but I'll always be entrepreneurial, that's how I am.

Belén's recounting reads like a casebook example of how the concept of entrepreneurialism bends towards various directions of meaning through everyday expressions. Her co-workers in the cooperative shared Belén's views and loquaciously responded to my questions of what 'being entrepreneurial' meant for them. Most of them associated entrepreneurialism with a particular way of doing things; some saw it as a moral imperative that distinguishes 'progressive' people from those who are 'lazy' and 'unwilling to work', as if pointing to the interwovenness between entrepreneurialism and social acceptance and legitimacy.

Entrepreneurialism as a moral imperative also shines through Sofia's, 29, story. She has been able to set up her own business while working in the cooperative, although it is in her husband's name. It is in her husband's name because otherwise she would not be able to participate in Argentina Trabaja (cf. De Sena and Chahbenderian 2011). This is rather ironic: the idea of the programme is to help the participants to use the cooperative as a springboard to insert themselves in the job markets or, even better, set their own business. Yet starting a business while still working in a cooperative is not among the cooperative workers' rights, even if only during a transitional period. Although officially Sofía cannot be the owner of her own kiosk, her story exemplifies the potential entrepreneurial success that cooperative work can lead to.

She has worked in the cooperative for five years. Through diligent saving, she has acquired the necessary

capital to start a store where she and her husband sell vegetables. For her, despite continuing to work in the Cooperativa, being an entrepreneur means having her own business and, in her words, to 'be her own boss.' She then tells me:

> It's taken us seven years to build our home, to have a real kitchen and a bathroom, get furniture. I've saved literally everything I could that I've earned with the Cooperativa. I've gone to all the (Argentina Trabaja) courses and learnt about business… the kiosk, well, at first, I sold vegetables through our kitchen window in the afternoons. But then we could expand our house with an extra room and now that room is the shop… And now we also sell fruit and some other food stuff. Marcos still works outside [the store] but when I'm here [in the Cooperativa] in the mornings, he is in the shop… I want us to progress as a family, with small things, like to have a second floor so that when my son goes to the university, he can live upstairs while he studies.

Sofía wants to continue to 'progress' and expand her business and obtain a better locale that would not occupy space in her house. I find in my notes and transcriptions clusters of similar statements from my conversations and interviews with her: 'It is important to progress,' 'The country needs to progress,' 'It's difficult to progress if the country doesn't support entrepreneurs.' The verb 'to progress' inhabits Sofía's speech as she lays out her future visions. Yet at the same time, uncertainty about the future economic conditions also frames her talk, which becomes apparent in other speech clusters: 'I don't think it's easy to be an entrepreneur in Argentina;' 'If Macri [the president at the time] starts taking away different social services and porgramme's, it'll be hard to progress;' 'You have to be really careful with risks [involved in being an entrepreneur].'

Sofía's narrative reveals the aspirational dimension of the entrepreneurial discourse. On the surface, it follows a template of ambition and achievement. It speaks to ideals of success where success implies autonomy, legitimacy, and self-fulfilment. But the discursive construction of her narrative also reveals a set of embedded antagonisms (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). The project of becoming what one wants to be is jeopardised by menacing potentialities, namely 'Argentina,' 'Macri,' 'risks.' The discourse, then, evolves as those antagonisms are solved. Repeated articulation of entrepreneurial imaginaries breaks the tension between the poles of success and failure. In doing so, it highlights how the menacing potentialities – among them, ironically, the State and the president – and overcoming them may in fact further the quintessential entrepreneurial project of becoming what one wants to be.

The neoliberal logic underpinning the Cooperativa members' recounting and interactions exemplifies how a market rationality can seep into nonmarket domains. In that process, that logic becomes naturalized (Gago 2017). Rather than a logic of competition in the capitalist sense, it becomes a logic anchored in the individual's everyday freedom to choose (Cabaña and Merlo 2017; Rose 1999). In the Cooperativa, the freedom to choose materialises in the choice to consider oneself an entrepreneur (on par with being a cooperative worker) rather than, say, an informal worker. That choice, perceived as free, stems from a belief of what is best for oneself within one's socioeconomic realm (cf. Dardot and Laval 2013:189). And what nurtures those beliefs are the ideals of success that mimic the rationale behind neoliberal policy making, e.g., deregulation and institutional meritocracy (Carpenter 2017). What this shows is the circuitous process that binds together top-down neoliberal policies and bottom-up aspirations and strategies. In short, this dynamic process fuelled by the promise of freedom and change serves as the pivot of the everyday logic of neoliberalism.

CONCLUSION

The concept of entrepreneurialism and the figure of the entrepreneur are constantly (re)shaped in public and political discourse (Cabaña 2017; Nicholson and Anderson 2005). As an engine behind this, political and institutional forces disseminate entrepreneurial models and imaginaries that convert into dynamic vocabularies accessible to all. Fair enough: the 'ideal' entrepreneur may still be portrayed as a young innovative male with enough audacity and practical skills to launch a world-changing start-up from his garage, i.e., 'the capitalist hero of the 21st century,' as José Natanson (2016:1) has aptly put it. But even then, the socially spread imaginaries of that ideal are situational and thus adoptable by people across different labour sectors and the socioeconomic spectrum.

In this article, I have argued that today in Argentina, there is a popularized and stubborn discourse of entrepreneurialism that has seeped into even those spheres of work where one might not expect to find it. A small state-sponsored woodwork and handicraft cooperative in the Argentine hinterlands is not what first comes to mind when imagining a hub for articulations that feed into and are fed by that discourse. Yet upon a closer look, the Cooperativa turns out to be precisely that; a site where the entrepreneurial credo frames the making and shaping of the workers' dispositions, subjectivities, and sense of self. The case study of the

Cooperativa shows that an everyday neoliberal logic underpins that entrepreneurial credo and pushes forth the corollary discourse. There is, of course, a sense of irony to this: neoliberalism in its myriad iterations is a corrosive force, detrimental to our sociocultural, economic, and environmental life. How can it then serve as a logic that orients those people's self-identifications and aspirations who have been and continue to be the ones whom the neoliberal way of the world is first to punish?

This equation makes sense if we approach and analyse that logic by examining how it operates in daily language and discourse, and in the endeavour to be entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurialism is the quintessential dimension of today's neoliberalism (Freeman 2007; 2014) and as such, a powerful way to construct an idea of oneself according to the (neoliberalized) ideals of self-governance, independence, flexibility, and resilience, to name but a few. But even more than that, being entrepreneurial is also presented and perceived as a one-way ticket out of the socioeconomic peripheries that are fenced by structural inequality. The cooperative workers' accounts point directly to the pervasiveness of not only the entrepreneurial discourse but also the nationally promoted entrepreneurial spirit that spreads the word of freedom (to be what one wants to be) – as seen, for instance, in the Buenos Aires's campaign to promote entrepreneurship. In a social context where the shadow economy is ubiquitous and working within it easily conducive to socioeconomic stagnation, entrepreneurial imaginaries of 'choice' offer an attractive possibility to aspire for.

The Cooperativa is a site that cultivates those imaginaries. It serves as a space where a sense of freedom and autonomy are sewn into the choice to be an entrepreneurial *cooperativista* or an entrepreneur. Predicated on the everyday logic of neoliberalism, it is fair to say that that choice only offers an illusion of freedom (Rose 1999) for the logic itself disguises systemic causes for inequality and instead only foregrounds individual rights and responsibilities. But in the Cooperativa, the discourse of entrepreneurialism hides the illusionary side, offering instead the necessary vocabularies to conceive of and express oneself as a self-governing agent of one's own fate.

AN EPILOGUE

'Things are going from bad to worse, it's just horrible,' Josefa says as she, Teresa, and I are having mate at Teresa's place and discussing Argentina's current economic situation. 'Thanks to that Macri, that son of a bitch, we'll have another 2001 before 2020!' she continues. 'What do you think will happen to the Cooperativa?' I ask. Teresa laughs loudly and says that if Macri kills their cooperative, they will continue on their own, independently.

> The machines are ours; Argentina Trabaja has given them to us, we don't have to return them to anybody. And I'll tell you more, I've already been talking to people from the Cultural Centre to see if we could get a fixed place to sell our products in their store. Who knows, we might become famous! I mean, our work will be famous.

Josefa takes a more severe tone and says that she does not want to waste everything she has accomplished with the *Cooperativa*. But if the *Cooperativa* dies, she knows she will find ways to 'progress.' 'It's not only about if you are able to make money or not, it's about the mentality, not being poor in the mind. So I'll find ways and I'll continue fighting.' The way Josefa says it sounds like a call to arms. And then she says: 'See, I'm an entrepreneur,' and laughs.

NOTES

1 *Mate* is an herbal drink made of yerba mate habitually consumed across Argentina and the neighboring countries.

2 By using the term entrepreneurialism, I refer not only to the practice of 'doing business' (which I more literally refer to as entrepreneurship) but rather as an identity, attitude, and a way of being (Freeman 2014).

3 Examples of such discourses analysed by scholars include, e.g., that of self-help (Rimke 2020), fitness and wellbeing (Wiest et. al. 2015) or, say, human resilience (Chandler and Reid 2016).

4 In 2018, with Mauricio Macri as the president, Argentina Trabaja was merged with two other programmes, Ellas Hacen and Desde el Barrio, and the three combined became known as Hacemos Futuro. In 2020, now with Alberto Fernández in power, Hacemos Futuro was complemented with Salario Social Complementario and the two together became Potenciar Trabajo. See Cynthia Mango (2021) for an excellent discussion on the different phases and transition periods the programme witnessed since its inception until 2018.

5 In the context of this article, it is worth mentioning that during 2016-2017, at the time of my fieldwork, some of the participation rules were eased. For example, the programme no longer required the cooperative workers to work eight hours a day – four would suffice. The cooperative workers could now also enrol in universities or other higher education institutions. Further, participating in skill acquisition courses was no longer strictly observed, despite it having been one of the initial eligibility conditions set by AT (Hopp 2017). All these factors reflected in my interlocutors' narratives and descriptions of how the programme operated in practice. What also reflected in their stories was Santiago's own sociocultural realities that were, to a degree, permissive of some amount of rule-bending and managerial exchanges of favours. These could either help or hinder the establishing of a cooperative and subsequently its functioning (cf. Hopp 2015).

6 This tendency is notable in countries where people are particularly dependent on self-employment due to lack of public funds or a functioning welfare state (c.f. Pabón Frías 2021; Ruiz et. al. 2016).

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