

Labour as a Commons: The Example of Worker-Recuperated Companies

Critical Sociology

2018, Vol. 44(4-5) 763–776

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DOI: 10.1177/0896920516661856

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Abstract

This article argues that labour can be understood as a commons, located in the discussion of how commons can advance the transformation of social relations and society. To manage labour as a commons entails a shift away from the perception of labour power as the object of capital's value practices, towards a notion of labour power as a collectively and sustainably managed resource for the benefit of society. Given that social change is largely a result of social struggle, it is crucial to examine germinal forms of labour as a commons present in society. I focus my analysis on worker-recuperated companies in Latin America and Europe. Worker-recuperated companies are enterprises self-managed by their workers after the owners close them down. Despite operating within the hegemonic capitalist market, they do not adopt capitalist rationality and are proven viable. Worker-recuperated companies offer a new perspective on labour as a commons.

Keywords

sociology, commons, labour, transformation, decommodification, occupation, self-management

Introduction

In recent debates on the commons and social transformation, several authors point to commoning as a strategy to undermine or even overcome capitalism (De Angelis, Fattori, Federici, Hardt, Harvey, Linebaugh, Negri, Rifkin and Wainwright, among others). David Harvey (2012), as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009), develop a focus on the urban commons and contend that the context for the development of an alternative society based on the commons is the metropolis. Nevertheless, most examples of commoning discussed in the relevant literature are set in rural areas, where access to commoning practices seems to be easier than in urban spaces and traditions are more persistent (Bennholdt-Thompson and Mies, 2001; Federici, 2011; Federici and Caffentzis, 2014; Klein, 2001; Linebaugh, 2014; Ostrom, 1990). Scholarly work on the urban commons usually focuses on public space and the attempts to counteract its increasing commodification.

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Examples refer to the temporal collective appropriation of public space (occupation, protest, etc.), access to commodified public space and its prolonged collective use, most prominently urban gardens, collective housing and the recomunalization of water (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015). However, inasmuch as individualization and commodification of labour power is central to the capitalist mode of production and the transformative potential of commoning resides on collective action and efforts at decommodification, the question of how labour can be transformed into a commons is therefore of exceptional interest. The commons shift the conversation to a space which is neither private nor public. The explicit debate about labour power as a commons has mainly taken place in international meetings and conferences (COPAC, 2011; Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2013). Hilary Wainwright, with the background of a feminist critique of wage labour and capitalism, is among those who have advocated conceiving of labour as a commons in conferences (Wainwright, 2012). Walker (2013) has also made important contributions to the discussion. So far, however, the debate lacks empirical grounding. Examples tend to be limited to digital production. I suggest that practices of labour as commoning exist, although often not self-defined as such.

Considering the obvious difficulty of any attempt at decommodifying labour power in societies with a capitalist mode of production, research has to examine germinal forms of labour as a commons, appraising the virtues and contradictions of concrete practices. The focus of my analysis is worker-recuperated companies (WRCs): former capitalist businesses that were closed down by their owners or went into bankruptcy, leading to a workers' occupation and a struggle to restart operations under collective and democratic self-management. The individual private property of the means of production is transformed into collective property with a social purpose and with no individual ownership (CDER, 2014; Chedid et al., 2013: 27, 30; Ruggeri, 2014: 16).

Since the year 2000, workers have recuperated hundreds of companies worldwide. In order to proceed to the analysis of WRCs as instances of labour commoning, it is necessary to outline the conception of the commons employed. I will first introduce the idea of commoning as a means of social transformation, and then elaborate a definition of labour as a commons. Based on these premises I analyse WRCs in South America and Europe.¹ Finally, I compare Ostrom's 'design principles' of Common Pool Resource institutions (1990: 90) to WRCs.

The Comeback of the Commons

Originally the commons referred to collectively used resources, as was the case with most natural resources before they were progressively enclosed by capital. The commons preceded private property and capitalism (Linebaugh, 2014: 14; Rifkin, 2014: 29–38). Capital needs the commons for the ongoing accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004). With increasing enclosure by capital and the prevalence of the dualism of public and private, the commons was pushed out of the focus of attention, especially in the Global North. In the Global South, traditional commoning practices have in part survived to this day. Although many are based on age-old customs, they do not simply constitute residual traditions; on the contrary, they are self-organized systems of 'collective reproduction of life through daily practices' (De Angelis, 2010: 955), adapted to the ever-changing circumstances of contemporary societies.

Since the mid-1990s, the commons have been visibly re-emerging in the Global South, especially related to the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, and other indigenous struggles. (Federici, 2011; Federici and Caffentzis, 2014; Vergara-Camus, 2014). Conceptions of the commons had a prominent role in the global justice movement (Klein, 2001) and were and are at the core of relevant collective struggles in the Global South such as the 'Water War' (2000) and the 'Gas Wars' (2003/2005) in Bolivia (Dangl, 2007), company recuperations and neighbourhood organizing in Argentina (Sitrin, 2012), land occupations by the landless movement in Brazil (from

which the WRCs borrowed the slogan ‘occupy, resist, produce’) and other struggles to preserve land, water, seeds, etc., as commons, against privatization by transnational corporations. Concepts and practices of commoning characterize the new global movements since 2008 (De Angelis, 2014: 302; Hardt and Negri, 2012: 89–90; Linebaugh, 2014: 17, 24).

In Europe conceptions of commons are present in struggles to preserve resources or re-communalize privatized public resources, turning them into locally-controlled commons, especially water, electricity and parks and open spaces in inner city areas. Further debates and practices of commoning are connected to digital and creative commons, currencies and knowledge (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012). The discourse of the commons is increasingly pervasive today. Private businesses present ‘sharing economy’ as a commons, integrate commons into the market or have them producing for the market. While historically capital preyed on the commons with enclosures, the current trend is to utilize them.

The commons is neither state nor market: it is not a public good administered or regulated by the state, and it is not private property or a source of surplus value extracted by outsiders offering ‘participation’. Commoning is the alternative to the supposed dualism of state vs. private, which are not opposed to each other but share the same logic: ‘Both archetypes are inserted into a fundamental structure: the rule of a subject (an individual, a company, the government) over an object (a private good, an organisation, a territory)’ (Mattei, 2012).

Commoning as Social Transformation

A commons is not a thing, and neither is it a resource or the simple act of sharing. The commons is a social relationship based on human activity. It consists of both a resource and a manner of using, caring for and preserving it by a collective subject (Fattori, 2011; Federici, 2011; Helfrich, 2008; Linebaugh, 2008, 2014; Ostrom, 1990; Rifkin, 2014). The commons are administered collectively, by adopting a set of norms regarding their use that ensures their preservation for future generations. This means that the commons call for the existence of self-constituting and self-organizing communities, while commoning fosters self-organization within communities (Ostrom, 1990). ‘Wherever commons have existed over time, they were protected, cared for, used, regulated by a distinct local community of people for whom these commons constituted the basis of their livelihood’ (Bennholdt-Thompson and Mies, 2001: 1010).

The commons become commons through commoning (Linebaugh, 2014: 17), ‘there are no commons without incessant activities of commoning, of (re)producing in common’ (De Angelis, 2010: 955). The use of the verb ‘commoning’ (Linebaugh, 2008: 279) shifts the focus to collective activity. Pointing to a system of social interaction instead of a resource or a distribution mechanism makes it much easier to discern the potential of commoning for social transformation. According to Fattori (2011):

The commons are what is considered essential for life, understood not merely in the biological sense. They are the structures, which connect individuals to one another, tangible or intangible elements that we all have in common and which make us members of a society, not isolated entities in competition with each other. Elements that we maintain or reproduce together, according to rules established by the community.

Focusing on commoning as an activity also reminds us that the commons as such is not an automatic solution to all contradictions of contemporary societies, as for example gender inequality, racism or neo-colonialism, but rather is a social process. The outcome depends on specific deliberate practices of commoning and the context in which they take place. To rule out that the fruits of the commons are appropriated by others in order to extract surplus value and that commons become

a privilege reserved to a small and wealthy minority, it is necessary to tether the concept of the commons to equality.

The drive to overcome the vision of society and politics as distinct spheres separated from one another – a separation which is foundational to capitalism and the bourgeois state – is inherent to the activity of commoning, which transcends the differentiation between those who govern and those who are governed. The task at hand is no longer to construct the correspondence between the political and the social – as in representative democracy – but to include the production of the political in the creation of the social (Negri, 1994: 373).

A struggle is underway between contrasting value practices of capital and the commons. While the value practices of the commons are predicated on the needs of the community and the preservation and reproduction of the commons (De Angelis, 2014: 302), the value practices of capitalism are driven by the generation and diversion of surplus value.

Contrary to capital, which is sustained on inequality and competition, the commons connects individuals in networks founded on cooperation, mutualism and equality. While the commons tend to build spaces free of capital relations, '[c]apitalism has been a program for the commodification of everything' (Wallerstein, 2000: 157). A reason why Linebaugh considers commons 'antithetical to capital' (2014: 14). It is '[t]his value struggle [which] lies at the heart of the commons' potential as a social system and force that might overcome the hegemony of capital' (De Angelis, 2013: 606). Anti-capitalist commons should function as autonomous spaces 'from which to reclaim control over the conditions of our reproduction' and 'increasingly disentangle our lives from the market and the state' (Federici and Caffentzis, 2014: i101). Accordingly, commoning necessitates a process of decommodification, abolition of exploitation and transformation of the social relations of production.² It is essentially what Wallerstein (2000: 157) calls a long process of 'the elimination of the category of profit'.

Labour as Commoning

Wage labour as such cannot be organized as commoning praxis. 'Labour' is generally understood as wage labour, the form most labour is forced to assume in capitalism. In this argument I rely on the distinction between labour and labour power proposed by Marx. Following Marx, labour is 'the activity of work', the physical activity or effort of producing use value, while labour power, the ability for labour, is 'the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form (*Leiblichkeit*), the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use value of any kind' (Marx, 1976: 270). Labour and labour power always existed. It is the form of society that determines their characteristics. The capitalist mode of production commodifies use values and turns them into 'material bearers' of exchange value (Marx, 1976: 126). The employer purchases the worker's labour power as a commodity and becomes the owner of the goods produced by that worker. Under capitalism, workers have to sell their labour power to employers in exchange for a money wage. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, labour power is not a commodity like any other: it is a commodity attached to the worker, and without the worker the commodity cannot exist. Labour power exists only as a capacity of the living individual (Marx, 1976: 274). Moreover, it is 'a commodity whose use value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification (*Vergegenständlichung*) of labour, hence a creation of value' (Marx, 1976: 270). The surplus value 'depends, in the first place, on the degree of exploitation of labour power' (Marx, 1976: 747). Once the labour power has been acquired it is not a generic potentiality anymore but turns – for the time it has been purchased – into concrete labour. But for the duration that labour power is not purchased and put to work, it is lost forever. This waste of social potential is inherent

to capitalism. Thus, governing labour as a commons represents a significant paradigm shift in society (Rifkin, 2014; Wainwright, 2012).

Given that within capitalism labour power is considered an individual capacity, a first step in moving away from the conception of labour power as a commodity is the admission that '[r]egardless of whether work is paid or unpaid, the capacity to perform it is the outcome of an intrinsically social, co-operative activity' (Walker, 2013). The human ability to create is a collective social capability and not an individual gift. It is dependent on knowledge and skills developed by others in the past; on the socially organized systems of preserving and passing them to the new generations; on the cooperation with others; and on the social reproduction of individuals. Treating labour power as an individual commodity exchangeable on the market is a mechanism for the appropriation of collective socially produced value by private entities.

Revisiting the previously cited characteristics of the commons as summarized by Fattori (2011), it can be confirmed that labour as the capacity to create is 'essential for life'; it 'connects individuals to one another'; it is a resource that would be best used if maintained and reproduced together 'according to rules established by the community' and being 'self-governed through forms of participative democracy' (Fattori, 2011). If labour is an inherently social activity that depends on the flow of cooperation within society and is in turn socially beneficial, it follows that the way to make best use of it is to govern it collectively as a commons. WRCs are attempts at doing this on a relatively small scale.

Workplace Recuperations in Latin America and Europe

Workplace recuperations became most visible and known around the takeovers in Argentina because of the 2000–1 crisis, when they became a widespread practice. In early 2016 there were approximately 360 WRCs in Argentina, involving 15,000 workers (CDER, 2014), at least 78 WRCs employing 12,000 workers in Brazil (Chedid et al., 2013: 249–51) and almost two dozen WRCs in Uruguay (Rieiro, 2015). In Venezuela there are several dozen WRCs, some managed jointly by workers and communities. There are also struggles for workers' control in a few dozen of the nationalized and state-owned companies in Venezuela (Azzellini, 2012, 2014, 2016). A handful of WRCs have emerged in Mexico (Cuninghame, 2015), India and Indonesia. In the course of the contemporary crisis, many more workplace recuperations took place in Argentina (CDER, 2014) and Venezuela (Azzellini, 2016), and a few in Italy, France, Greece, Bosnia, Croatia, Egypt, Turkey and in the US (Azzellini, 2015a).

Over the past 150 years, workers have taken control of their workplaces in different historical circumstances (Azzellini, 2015a; Ness and Azzellini, 2011). But while earlier takeovers happened in the context of workers' or revolutionary offensives, the takeovers of the past two decades occur in defensive situations. In the general context of the crisis many workers have no other job prospect or means of subsistence. In most cases they do not have the support of the main unions or institutional political forces. Often the machinery is obsolete, in need of repair or has been taken away by the owners and the old business relations do not exist anymore. The workers do not have prior experience in self-management or access to financing in order to invest. In the midst of a capitalist crisis and a crisis of traditional unionism, the workers move to self-organized offensive struggles.

Almost all WRCs are small and medium sized enterprises. There are WRCs in most industries, such as metal, textile, ceramics, food processing, plastic and rubber, print shops and others. There are also WRCs in the service sector, such as clinics, education facilities, media, hotels and restaurants, though still much less than the industrially-based ones (Azzellini, 2015b, 2016; CDER, 2014: 72–5; Chedid et al., 2013: 249–51). Material conditions, laws and political context vary from country to country. Nevertheless, there exist common characteristics among WRCs. The departure

point of any WRC is a self-organized group of workers that refuses to accept that private ownership determines whether the workplace will continue existing. They dismiss solutions based on the individual reallocation of their labour power and advance an alternative based on collective processes.

Workplace recuperations entail the transformation of a hierarchically structured capitalist business, which pursues primarily the increase of surplus value, into a democratically self-managed company with the workers' well-being at its centre. In this process almost everything changes: the workers' subjectivities; social relations among the workers; labour process; internal dynamics and relationship with the providers, customers and communities. A workplace recuperation is therefore not only an economic process but also – or even primarily – a social process (Azzellini, 2015b; CDER, 2014; Chedid et al., 2013; Ruggeri, 2014; Sitrin, 2012). Economic viability is important, but in WRCs it is intrinsically connected with the aims of democratization, solidarity, justice, dignity, alternative value production and overcoming workers' alienation.

Most WRCs take the form of cooperatives. It is usually the only juridical form that allows collective management, thus providing a legal base for the operation of the company (Azzellini, 2015b; Novaes and Sardá de Faria, 2014: 86–7; Ruggeri, 2014: 14–17).³ Nevertheless, there are important differences between cooperatives and WRCs. WRCs are not formed by a pre-established group of volunteers who share a set of values. Argentinian researcher Andrés Ruggeri points out:

In a WRC there are all the workers that used to be in the company. That means from the leftist vanguardist convinced of going straight against capital to the one who yesterday voted for the first time, who was the employers' best friend. The conclusion is self-management does not need vanguards, everyone can be part of a process of self-management.⁴

As Luca Federici from the RiMaflow WRC in Milan, Italy, reveals: 'Some people here have previously voted for Berlusconi or the *Lega Nord* and today they are here to recuperate a factory. If you had told them that six years ago, they would have said: Who? Me? Are you crazy?' (Azzellini and Ressler, 2014). The inclusion of different subjectivities opens up the possibility that the commons-based economic activity can 'create a social basis for alternative ways of articulating social production, independent from capital and its prerogatives' (DeAngelis, 2012: 185).

In most WRCs the workers see the means of production – as the Greek Vio.Me. workers – 'as collectively managed commons that enable them to work and produce, rather than as the property of individuals' (Kioupkiolis and Karyotis, 2015: 316). Therefore WRCs do not have individual shares of property, unequal distribution of shares or external investors, as it is the case with some workers' buy-outs (Azzellini, 2015b). WRCs socialize the former private capitalist property. This transformation was at the origin of parts of the workers' cooperative movement a century ago, but it is no longer present in most cooperatives (Ruggeri, 2014: 16). WRCs originate from the contradiction between capital and labour and the existence of a struggle. Workers in WRCs are well aware of this. Through the experience of occupying and self-managing a workplace the workers reaffirm their identity as workers (but without an employer), which entails the question of class, instead of an identity as 'cooperativists' or "excluded," [...] in which the notion of a class living off its work gets lost' (Ruggeri, 2014: 16).

Democratic Self-Management, Equality and Disalienation

WRCs are democratically self-managed by a self-organized community, in line with the principles of the commons. They hold regular assemblies, where all workers have voice and vote, and make all important decisions in common (Azzellini, 2015a; CDER, 2014; Chedid et al., 2013; Ness and

Azzellini, 2011; PFA, 2010). While there are often agreements as to how many times workers should meet each year, without exception, every workplace I have visited, interviewed or heard of meets exponentially more times. Many have brief daily department meetings, workgroups for specific areas, and meetings of the workgroup delegates – in addition to the general assemblies. Democratic process is one of the main relationship changes in a WRC and most maintain the directly democratic practices they introduced during the initial struggle. In Argentina, 88% of the WRCs hold regular general assemblies, 44% hold weekly assemblies and 35% monthly assemblies (PFA, 2010: 47). This is in strong contrast to traditional cooperatives in Argentina, which meet much less often (CDER, 2014: 46). Cooperatives in the countries in question are required by law to have only one general assembly per year during which cooperative members choose to whom they delegate their decision-making power. Brazilian WCRs have fewer general assemblies than Argentine WRCs but hold regular department meetings; 75% have wall newspapers and 11% internal publications (Chedid et al., 2013: 124).

Some WRCs, especially in Venezuela, have been recuperated jointly by workers and communities, such as the former beer brewery Brahma-AmBev in Barquisimeto, abandoned by the owners in March 2013. Sixty of its workers occupied it and 30 are now managing it together with the local self-government: the Commune 'José Pío Tamayo'. The company generates income for all workers through an assortment of activities. They sell filtered well water, have established a car wash and opened a selling point for chicken supplied by the Beneagro WRC (Teruggi, 2015).

Official hierarchies and the segregation among different workers disappear in the struggle for takeover. Once the workers have experienced relationships of equality, they almost never reintroduce hierarchies and have no or relatively small differences in payment. A study of 81 Argentinian WRCs revealed that 45 were maintaining an absolute equality of payment; 34 WRCs had differences in payment, but the average difference between the lowest and highest pay was only 33%; and two of the surveyed companies had a payment structure where the highest pay was 75% more than the lowest. The reasons for higher pay were: differences in work tasks (41%) and in hours worked (27%), categorization of job by union (18%) and seniority (17%) (PFA, 2010: 55–6). During my research I confirmed equal remuneration in ten Venezuelan and six European smaller WRCs (Azzellini, 2015b). In Uruguay the situation is similar (Rieiro, 2015). Ramón Martínez, a worker in Uruven, a WRC tannery with 25 workers in Montevideo, states: 'We all earn the same, we have different roles and tasks, and every two years we elect five workers to be the directors of operations.'⁵

Large income inequalities exist only in Brazil, where 10 out of 50 analysed companies paid anywhere from the same amount to double the salary of the lowest to the highest paid, while 15 workplaces were paying five to ten times higher (Chedid et al., 2013: 128). Differences in payment or in some cases hiring of waged workers is mostly due to market pressure: WRCs fail to fill certain specialized positions if they offer all workers the same pay. Nevertheless, the huge differences in Brazil suggest the need of further research of causes and dynamics, given that they were democratically decided and are discussed frequently in 60% of the WRCs (Chedid et al., 2013: 126–29). In Argentina some recuperated health clinics decided to hire the doctors, among them the Clínica Junín in Córdoba, recuperated in 2002. As Esteban Torletti, janitor and head of the workers cooperative explains, the doctors showed difficulties in accepting the others as equals regarding work-time and opinion, so the workers decided to build the cooperative without doctors.⁶

A further characteristic feature of WRCs is job rotation: 70% of WRCs in Argentina have had some kind of job rotation (PFA, 2010: 54). The same applies to the WRCs I have visited in Europe and other parts of South America. At first rotation often comes out of necessity: not all employees participate in the recuperation; especially younger people, highly skilled workers and office workers tend not to. The workers have to rotate to fill in the gaps and to carry out tasks they were not

familiar with before the occupation. On the other hand, there is also a strong interest on behalf of most workers to learn other tasks. Often rotation comes about with debates on alienation and the fragmentation of work processes. Collective decision-making also demands and promotes a broader knowledge of the company's functioning.

The WRCs can overcome alienation and anxiety, which are constant companions of workers in conventional companies (Azzellini, 2014, 2015b; Azzellini and Ressler, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; CDER, 2014; PFA, 2010; Sitrin, 2012). In WRCs the workers' commitment is the driving force. Punch clocks and surveillance by superiors, cameras and guards do not exist anymore. Before the takeover, as Vio.Me. worker Makis Anagnostou expresses it, 'in the factories there was a regime of fear' (Azzellini and Ressler, 2015b). By regaining collective control over the product of their own labour, the workers engage in a process of 'progressive disalienation' (Mandel, 1971: 187–210). Giuseppe Terrasi, worker of the WRC Officine Zero (metal works) in Rome, Italy, recuperated in February 2012, sums up:

I got here 30 years ago as last in line, and to find myself self-managing this factory here ... it's reaching an objective ... that is the maximum aspiration a worker that has been exploited can have, to say 'now nobody exploits me anymore, now it's my place [...] finally I feel at home. (Azzellini and Ressler, 2015b)

Commoning in WRCs unleashes the workers' creativity. Workers improve production processes, build replacements, and invent new products and new activities (Azzellini, 2014, 2015b; Azzellini and Ressler, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, CDER, 2014; Sitrin, 2012). How labour power is used is determined in a process of commoning. Knowledge becomes also a commons as many workers prepare themselves to assume new functions. Julio González, worker of the Venezuela WRC Inveval (industrial valves) states:

People are being trained to have knowledge in all areas. A large number of comrades are studying in universities, and some are in missions [adult school programs] we have right here in our facilities. Several comrades have already graduated here, and are waiting to enter universities and continue studying to provide knowledge to our organization. Twenty-two are in the Mission Ribas [high school]. Ten are going to college studying bachelors' and higher technical degrees.⁷

In Venezuela workers can attend the programme Bolivarian Workers' University Jesús Rivero,⁸ thereby learning to systematize and contextualize their knowledge of labour and production process. In Argentina the popular *bachilleratos* (high school diploma programmes) were created in 2004 by the Cooperative of Popular Educators and Researchers (CEIP) together with the National Movement of Recuperated Companies (MNER). The first school was organized in the WRC Impa (metal works), recuperated in 1998.⁹ In 2010 the Impa Workers University began courses on the premises of the Impa.

New Value Production, Networks and Solidarity

'The value practices of WRCs are based on the needs of the community and the preservation and reproduction of the WRC' (De Angelis, 2014: 302). WRCs are likely to grow more slowly than capitalist companies. Their work regime and investment decisions are not based on what promises more profit. This is also attested to by the fact that redundancies do not exist in WRCs. What Ranis states for the Argentine tile-producing WRC FaSinPat (former Zanon) is valid for all WRCs I visited: workers are only fired because of 'malfeasance, proven neglect of the machinery and products, or a consistently unexplained absenteeism' (Ranis, 2010: 91).

WRCs usually maintain contacts with other movements, political and social organizations as well as the neighbourhood (Larrabure et al., 2011: 191). The strongest support for Argentine WRCs comes from other WRCs: 82.3% have received such support. There is, for example, the Graphics Network, a coordination of 15 print shops and graphic design companies, all of them WRCs, which has as one of its primary goals to support new WRCs in the sector: 64.7% had received the support of unions (mostly legal advice), 64.6% of social movements and parties and 29.4% of nearby communities (PFA, 2010: 21). Commoning at the workplace and networks of mutualism and solidarity turn many WRCs into a Common Pool Resources (CPR) institution. Almost all Argentinian WRCs engage in cultural, social and political activities – 39% even offer permanent space to cultural centres, radio stations, day-care facilities, popular bachilleratos and other activities (PFA, 2010: 80).

Ruggeri explains:

One of the most interesting aspects of WRCs is their relation with the community, with the social. None of the WRCs is recuperating itself alone [...] there is a much bigger movement of social links and networks built around every recuperated company and around recuperated companies as such [...], and it's changing the companies' meaning. If the workers recuperate a company all alone, if they turn it into a cooperative, etc., no matter how radical the internal process is, if it has only an economic activity it does not have the transformative potential it has with the whole network surrounding the movement.¹⁰

In Brazil, 71% of the WRCs are connected to other WRCs or solidarity economy endeavours; a third maintain good relations with unions; 39% are connected to other social movements and parties (Chedid et al., 2013: 161–6). Some WRCs have opened up the workplace for other projects. One of them is the plastic packing material factory Flaskô in Sumaré, São Paulo, under workers' control since 2003 (Chedid et al., 2013: 37, 244). In 2005, the workers along with local families occupied a plot of land next to the factory and built a 'workers' and people's neighbourhood' with housing for 560 families. An empty storehouse was occupied and transformed into a sports and cultural centre and a community radio station was set up within the grounds of the factory. The number of workers rose from 50 to 80 and Flaskô is cooperating in recycling projects with local communities and schools, which collect plastic waste used by Flaskô as raw material (Flaskô, 2015).

In Uruguay, WRCs are strongly connected to the union federation and to the solidarity economy sector. Unions have historically had strong ties to the workers' cooperative movement.¹¹ In Venezuela, WRCs and struggles for workers' control receive strong support from self-organized communities (Azzellini, 2016). In Europe the most important support came from social movements and solidarity initiatives – only the French WRCs enjoyed a relevant union support.

Instead of competition, a new collaborative culture prevails both within and among WRCs. Half of the Brazilian WRCs have economic relations with other WRCs (Chedid et al., 2013: 163). A survey of 82 Argentine WRCs revealed that 16.05% of their supplies come from other WRCs and 2.47% from social economy companies (PFA, 2010: 35–6). Considering that WRCs make up less than 0.1% of the total workforce and GDP, it follows that they prefer business relations with other WRCs. They support each other and exchange knowledge and experiences in national, continental and global encounters. All six European WRCs were inspired by the Argentinian movement and five of them were visited by Argentinian workers. For Vio.Me. it was decisive for the takeover. Worker Dimitris Koumatsioulis remembers: 'We had the comrades from the Argentine factories here, we had long discussions, and they helped us expand our horizon, as well as lift our spirits' (Azzellini and Ressler, 2015a). In another example of international solidarity, when Mexican tyre manufacturing WRC Euzkadi renewed its machinery, it contacted tyre manufacturing WRC Funsá

in Uruguay and offered them the old machinery free.¹² Similarly, Vio.Me. received help for improving their organic detergents from an Italian chemical engineer free and incorporated two chemical engineers coming from the social movements into the workers' collective in order to implement the new formula.¹³ The strong ties and solidarity among WRCs show that a different set of values is prevalent among WRCs (Larrabure et al., 2011: 189–90).

Contradictions

The most evident contradiction regarding labour as a commons in WRCs is that they can neither cut their ties to the market nor to the state. Being 'neither state nor market' is therefore complex. To a certain extent WRCs are autonomous spaces 'from which to reclaim control over the conditions of our reproduction' (Federici and Caffentzis, 2014: i101). But 'in a situation in which capital and commons are both pervasive systems that organise the social, it is clear that often a solution *will* imply a particular deal between these two, that is, a particular form of their structural coupling' (De Angelis, 2014: 304). WRCs do not have any other choice than to enter hegemonic capitalist market relations (PFA, 2010: 36). Pressure to abide by the rules of capital is not only external; internal conflicts are most often linked to payment, social hierarchy at work, working hours and commitment (Azzellini, 2012; PFA, 2010: 55–6).

WRC 'protagonists have taken it mostly upon themselves to restructure their enterprises [...], restart production and make their firms economically viable once again' (Larrabure et al., 2011: 189). Nevertheless, workplace occupations require a political solution. Most WRCs in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela and France experienced some kind of state intervention, although always due to the pressure they developed (Azzellini, 2013: 224–7, 2015b: 70–4; Chedid et al., 2013; PFA, 2010: 71).

A paradigm shift in regard to labour also needs to overcome both the division between production and reproduction and the gendered division of labour (Federici, 2011; Wainwright, 2012). This remains a topic which has yet to be researched in detail in WRCs.¹⁴ Almost all WRCs – with exceptions in the education, health, media and textile sector – have an overwhelmingly male workforce: in Brazil, among 21 companies studied, 77% of the workforce was male (Chedid et al., 2013: 71); the equivalent figure was 82% in Argentina (PFA, 2010: 45). Female workers mostly receive less support from their families, and are challenged more. Mariarosa Missaglia from RiMaflow in Milan reflects on this:

At home it was also a struggle: 'Everything is already decided, why are you doing this?' It is also a satisfaction to be able to say at home, 'See, I have made it,' and anyway you have to keep fighting for what you believe. (Azzellini and Ressler, 2014)

Commoning at the workplace fosters common and collective activities beyond it. Through increased social activities with workers and their families, WRCs I visited in different countries often shifted some of the burden of social reproduction into the workplace with, for example, food cooked collectively and organized child care. Stronger social networks, solidarity and mutual care also make it easier to get support or time off at work when needed.

Conclusion

The fundamental principles governing the commons apply to labour in WRCs. Workers create self-constituting and self-organizing communities (Bennholdt-Thompson and Mies, 2001; Ostrom, 1990), accomplishing 'collective reproduction of life through daily practices' (De Angelis, 2010:

955). What workers do in a WRC is what is 'essential for life' (Fattori, 2011); it is the reproduction and production of life as commoning. The self-constituted community assumes control of the abandoned workplace, takes care of it and puts it into operation.

If we compare the 'design principles' of long-enduring Common Pool Resource institutions, postulated by Ostrom (1990: 90), to WRCs, five out of seven apply without restriction. WRCs have: (a) clearly defined boundaries regarding appropriators; (b) 'congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions'; (c) collective-choice arrangements: 'individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying' them; (d) monitoring accomplished by 'the appropriators'; and (e) graduated sanctions for violators of the rules and norms that are decided among all 'appropriators'.

The two remaining characteristics are only partly applicable: conflict resolution mechanisms exist among appropriators, but until legal status is achieved they do not exist 'between appropriators and officials'; the formal illegality of the takeovers impedes also the 'rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions [that] are not challenged by external governmental authorities'. Even once the status of a WRC is legalized, it might still suffer attacks from private owners and state authorities. However, this does not call into question the status of WRCs as CPR institutions, but only how long-enduring they might be.

Nevertheless, in the case of Argentina, of 205 WRCs studied in 2010, only six had shut down at the end of 2013 and 63 new WRCs were organized (CDER, 2014: 10, 13). The starting point of WRCs is precisely the moment a capitalist enterprise closes down. In this disadvantageous situation they have proven their viability 'and largely maintain their central values of equity and worker self-management' (Ozarow and Croucher, 2014: 990) as shown for most WRCs (Azzellini, 2015; CDER, 2014; Chedid et al., 2013; Rieiro, 2015).

Research and empirical evidence indicate that WRCs are long-enduring, not despite but because of struggle and conflict. Rupture and struggle are at 'the centre of the problematic of the commons re-production' (De Angelis, 2007: 74). Expropriations, financial support and the drafting of new laws in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela demonstrate that WRCs have influenced state policy (Azzellini, 2014; CDER, 2014; Chedid et al., 2013; Ranis, 2010; Rieiro, 2015).

The production of different values based on solidarity and mutualism shows the transformative potential of labour as a commons in WRCs. WRCs maintain 'their central values, even while being forced to interact with the market and the state. Managerial decisions are made and applied within a framework of non-capitalist ideas' (Ozarow and Croucher, 2014: 1003). To do so is easier the more WRCs exist and are connected with each other. The same applies to the achievements regarding institutional reactions. As Gigi Malabarba from RiMaflo, Milan, explains: 'We can win if we are part of a larger struggle and increase tenfold and a hundredfold experiences such as these, to nurture the idea that another economy is possible' (Azzellini and Ressler, 2014).

The workers build a 'free association of producers', in Marx's terms. The labour power of the workers of a WRC is put to use for and by the collective. Work has stopped being a burden, it 'has become synonymous with the recovery of dignity, self-esteem and self-realisation' (Ozarow and Croucher, 2014: 1000). Democratic control over their work, understanding of the whole production process and the new social relations built contribute to the disalienation of workers.

Despite all contradictions, hurdles and external attacks, WRCs are an important example of a new understanding of labour power as a commons. The potential of WRCs lies in their ability to provide people with concrete solutions and a perspective for the future when the market and state fail to do so; in their inclusion of different subjectivities; and in their ability to join forces with other sectors, such as the solidarity economy and social movements, in building non-capitalist relations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Marina Sitrin, Massimo De Angelis and Theodoros Karyotis for their valuable comments.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. Since 2004 I have done field research in two dozen WRCs worker-controlled state companies that have included: Alcasa, Cacao Sucre, Invepal, Inveval, La Gaviota, Textileros del Táchira, Tomates Caísa (Venezuela), Alé Alé, Chilavert, Clínica Junín, Comercio y Justicia, Hotel BAUEN, Los Chanchitos, Molino Osiris, Nac&Pop (Argentina), Funsa, Profuncoop, Uruven (Uruguay), RiMaflow, Officine Zero (Italy), ex-Fralib (France) and Vio.Me., Eleftherotypia, ERT3 (Greece). And I have conducted interviews with workers from other WRCs (Argentina: Brukman, Pigüe, Zanon; Bosnia: Dita; Croatia: ITAS; France: Ex-Pilpa; Serbia: Jugoremedija; Turkey: Kazova; US: New Era Windows; Venezuela: Cemento Andino, INAF, Sanitarios Maracay, Vivex). There is a dearth of literature on the process and experience of recuperations, and thus much of my work is based on ethnographic observations and various forms of interviewing.
2. Social relations of production reproduce the logic of capital in power relations, commercial relations, and in the social division of labour.
3. Only Venezuela recognizes different forms of collective management (Azzellini, 2012, 2013).
4. Author's interview, Andrés Ruggeri, director Facultad abierta, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 15 January 2015.
5. Author's interview, Uruven, Montevideo, Uruguay, 5 February 2015.
6. Author's interview, Clínica Junín, Córdoba, Argentina, 22 January 2015.
7. Author's interview, Inveval, Los Teques, Venezuela, 9 April 2008.
8. For details see the official website: <http://www.mppeuct.gob.ve/ministerio/directorio/entes-adscritos/ubt-jesus-rivero>.
9. Author's interview, Natalia Polti, teacher in the popular bachillerato in the WRC Chilavert, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 13 February 2015.
10. Author's interview, director Facultad Abierta, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 15 January 2015.
11. Author's interview, Pablo Guerra, researcher, University of the Republic, Montevideo, Uruguay, 3 February 2015.
12. Author's interview, Funsa, Montevideo, Uruguay, 6 February 2015.
13. Author's interview, Theodoros Karyotis, Vio.Me. solidarity assembly, Thessaloniki, Greece, 22 January 2016.
14. Something I have begun to do for my forthcoming work.

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