

**Rethinking Difference, Rethinking Deference:  
'More than Workers, Less than Bosses', women and men, and the intertwining of  
hierarchy and patriarchy in the struggle to create the egalitarian workplace in  
five worker cooperatives in Buenos Aires**

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**Abstract**

It's impossible to understand how to organize cooperatively without focusing on 'sexual difference', the French philosopher Luce Irigaray's category for what has not yet been thought within our ostensibly sexually indifferent symbolic structures, but which we must think if we are to confront how patriarchy and hierarchy mutually reinforce each other. In this study of the struggle to create the egalitarian workplace in five worker cooperatives in Buenos Aires, I will follow Irigaray's argument that hierarchical relations will be continuously recreated if the patriarchal underpinnings of our symbolic structures which consign women always to the position of the lesser is not confronted. Workers and bosses come in two sexes: the individual without a sex does not exist, and to use the sexless individual as an analytical category simply obscures who has power and who does not. An absence of attention to sexual difference, which maintains that symbolically women are the same as men and experience the processes of organizing in exactly the same way, obscures rather than clarifies how we as women and men might organize in fully participatory, contiguous or non-hierarchical ways to get things done. Dismantling hierarchical relations between bosses and workers also means dismantling hierarchical relations between women and men: this study is an examination of what was accomplished in these five coops in terms of rethinking deference and rethinking difference.

**I. Introduction**

It's impossible to understand how to organize cooperatively without focusing on 'sexual difference', the French philosopher Luce Irigaray's category for what has not yet been thought within our ostensibly sexually indifferent symbolic structures, but which we must think if we are to confront how patriarchy and hierarchy mutually reinforce each other. In our present day symbolic structures, or the words, stories, philosophies, myths, religions we use to make sense of our world, women lack the place of the subject; they are object. Men remain the fulcrum, the norm, the phallus, the hinge of the logos of Lacan on which all meaning depends, a dance where women

must follow the dancer who composed the music, a dancer who is always male. For the male subject to maintain its coherence, woman is consigned to the place of the object, the body, emotion, all of the rejected aspects of the male subject which are then projected onto the place held by woman. As object, women are not differentiated; they all remain the same as each other--‘all dolls are the same’--and as object to the male subject they are both different from the male subject and lesser<sup>1</sup>. The meaning of these terms of subject and object, like all terms, depends on both exclusion and suppression of that exclusion for its coherence; meaning is always both dualistic and hierarchical, where what is ‘good’ [like mind, male, leader] is defined by what is ‘not good’ [or body, woman, subordinate]. These relations of domination and subordination circulate in our symbolic structures, working always to reconstitute the ‘different from the same’ as lesser.

Irigaray’s further point is that this relationship of the different as always lesser than the same is obscured by the supposedly liberating gesture of sexual indifference, that after all, we are all just individuals, that our sex does not matter, that you are an individual just like me. She argues that this gesture of sexual indifference—of assigning the status of the male subject to woman--does not confer equality on women who lack a place as subjects in our symbolic structures. Instead, it reinforces woman’s subordination to man in the guise of the masculine neutral. Irigaray maintains that it is only with the creation of the female subject through the actions of women and then in our definitions of those actions, will our differentness from each other as women be able to be represented. And only then, by creating a place for the female subject who does not extrapolate from the male subject how to be in the world, will we be able to create a space among and between women who are different from each other, will we be able to solve conflict among and between women, will we be able to create a ‘utopian horizon’ which we struggle towards, acting on a world which we define as female subjects. And by extension, only then will differentness be able to be expressed organizationally without being confined to the position of the lesser.

To follow Irigaray’s argument, then, is to emphasize that workers and bosses come in two sexes: the individual without a sex does not exist, and to use the sexless individual as an analytical category simply obscures who has power and who does not. An absence of attention to sexual difference in favour of a belief that both women and men can occupy the place of the sexually indifferent individual despite the presence of patriarchy, a belief which maintains that symbolically women are the same as men and experience the processes of organizing in exactly the same way, obscures rather than clarifies how we as women and men might organize in fully participatory, contiguous or non-hierarchical ways to get things done. Without confronting the rhetoric of the individual without a sex—the individual who in reality is male--without ensuring that

cooperation means the contiguous organizing of sexual difference next to sexual difference, the female subject next to the male subject who equally act on and define the world, hierarchy inevitably reasserts itself, and cooperation, with its emphasis on the full participation of equals and the equal involvement of all, is subverted.

Given my focus on these symbolic categories of [sexually indifferent] sameness and [sexual] difference as they underlie our assumptions about how we can achieve the egalitarian workplace, what interested me in my study of five worker cooperatives in Buenos Aires<sup>ii</sup> were two inextricably intertwined questions concerning how organizing cooperatively could be achieved in the face of hierarchy and patriarchy. First, how comprehensively did the men and women workers think about hierarchy in all its manifestations? What did they mean organizationally when they talked about equality and workers as equals, as ‘more than workers, less than bosses’ to paraphrase Raimbeau (2005, p. 11)? Equality as sameness is what Irigaray has called the great dream of symmetry, which allows the powerful to escape their own complicity in the maintenance of hierarchy, by asserting the two [the sexually different next to the sexually different] are One [the unacknowledged male One standing in for the two, male subject and female subject]. How did the women and men working in these cooperatives struggle to embody in their organizing processes and strategies the ethos of cooperation—learned as they said ‘in the tent’--among and between equals who were not the same, who were different, and who experienced the processes of organizing differently? As the workers often proudly informed me, these were worker coops where all decision makers were elected and everyone was paid the same. And it wasn’t only the ‘one member, one vote’ enshrined in the general assemblies and in the elections of coordinators. It was also that ‘we are all members of the cooperative’: all jobs were equally necessary, all were equally valuable, and therefore all were worthy of being paid the same. But elected general assemblies and coordinators and equal pay for all jobs were only part of how worker cooperatives struggled to interpret what equality and cooperation meant in practice<sup>iii</sup>.

Secondly, how did the workers confront how patriarchy circulates in these ostensibly egalitarian ways of organizing, where all work was treated as equally valuable, everyone could be elected to positions of authority, everyone was paid the same? More specifically, how did the worker coops deal with [sexual] difference, the argument, following Irigaray, that women and men are not substitutable—that women and men are equals who are different, who occupy different places in terms of who has power and who doesn’t, and who experience differently the processes of organizing, in particular the processes of decision making which undergird all organizing: of deciding what to do, how and whom to do it, and then what to do next? How did the coops deal with this unacknowledged maleness of the supposedly

sexually neutral or sexually indifferent individual, what Irigaray calls the reign of the masculine neutral, which must be confronted if cooperative organizing, with its emphasis on full and equal participation, full and equal involvement, is to succeed? How did the women and men challenge not only the hierarchy which cooperative organizing seeks to dismantle, but the patriarchal privilege that circulates simultaneously in our organizing processes, and which, unless confronted, inevitably reconstitutes hierarchical modes of organizing? Did no more deference to bosses by workers also mean no more deference to men by women?

In the next part of this paper, I want to examine how hierarchy and patriarchy-- shorthand for sexual hierarchy--intersect to subvert egalitarian organizing processes. More specifically, I want to examine the ways the workers, women and men, attempted, or not, to confront those hierarchical and patriarchal processes, each mutually reinforcing the other, in how they organized together to get work done. I want to begin by examining how the workers developed an ethos of cooperation, or how their shared experience of revolt 'in the tent' together led to a sense of politicized consciousness or awareness of their situation. Secondly, I want to examine how those shared experiences led, or not, to their commitment to egalitarian ways of organizing as they struggled to confront the workings of hierarchy in all its forms, not only between workers and bosses, but also between men and women. This analysis rests on how the workers conceptualized equality. Did the workers think that these egalitarian ways of organizing could be achieved through emphasizing that everyone is the same, the women just like the men? Or did they think that if the workers were different, they must be lesser, and equality could be achieved only if everyone is the same as everyone else? Or did they attempt to reconcile equality with difference in how they organized, so that being different did not mean being left out or pushed out by the same, however the same defined themselves? Did the workers, both women and men, confront how patriarchy—or sexual hierarchy--circulated within the ostensibly egalitarian organizing processes they put in place, and if they did, what did they do?

## **II. We were all 'in the tent' together: The development of shared politicized consciousness?**

In this section I wish to examine the consciousness raising or demystification that characterized what the workers told me they had all undergone before they "recovered their factories", after "the owners ceased production, stopped paying wages, and went bankrupt", and before the workers took over the factories and made them produce "without a boss or owner"<sup>iv</sup>. However, they used a much more concrete term: the workers called this the experience of the tent, where they were all together before they

recovered their factories, and where they learned they were far stronger than they thought, far more capable than they believed. They told me that this experience of the tent produced their commitment to democratic, egalitarian forms of organizing—‘we were all like ants together’ said one woman—just as it shaped them, demystified for them what they thought was going on, allowed them, in the company of their compatriots, to think again what was actually happening, and prepared them for deciding what they wanted to do about their present situation. In the tent they shared the opportunity for “discussion, feedback and comparison”, a process of inclusion and consensus that allowed views to be shared and “competing truths and mystifications of the human condition” dissected (Young, 1993, p. 143-144; cf. Lewis and Barnsley, 1992; Guijt & Shah, 1998). At the same time this shared experience of revolt was a process of politicized consciousness-raising (Raimbeau, 2005, cf. Brown, 1992) that enabled the workers in the tent “to gain a greater sense of self-worth, agency and common purpose” (Young, 1997, p. 370). What the workers--and most had been workers; only 20% of those who joined the recovered factory movement had been managers (Trigona, 2006)-- had to unlearn was deference and passivity, the result of a hierarchical way of working divided between bosses and workers that Morgan (2006) argues creates passivity, dependence, competitiveness and deference<sup>v</sup>. What they had to learn was the opposite. They had to learn to be subjects acting on the world and shaping it in a way that suited them, to learn contiguity in all its aspects, to learn how to confront the mutually sustaining operations of hierarchy and patriarchy as they circulated in the processes of ostensibly egalitarian forms of organizing: to confront the hierarchy between bosses and workers also meant to confront the hierarchy between men and women.

What their shared experiences in the tent taught the workers was that activism and hierarchy were antithetical. If the recovered factories were to succeed as worker cooperatives, hierarchical relations had to be dismantled, and egalitarian relations among and between workers who were capable, and because of their capabilities, powerful, had to be constructed if they were going to be able to accomplish their goals. If they didn’t construct ways of working together in egalitarian ways, they would revert to the bosses/worker hierarchy, so they had to figure out some way to displace that hierarchy in favour of contiguous relations among and between the workers. For these workers there was an explicit link between the experience of revolt and the development of a democratic consciousness, between how they understood and what they decided to do, or between learning how to think through their own relationship to a problem and not just simply leaving it to others. In making these links they recognized that they were knowers, that through the experience of the tent, they had become ‘political subjects’, to use Raimbeau’s term. By putting themselves in the picture, or grounding the issue in what they knew and had experienced (cf.

Lewis and Barnsley, 1992), they took upon themselves the power to make decisions, to decide what is going on, and then what to do about it, structuring into this process both action and responsibility for those actions. They learned in the tent not to leave the thinking to others; they demystified the position of the knower as a position held by someone else that could never be held by them because they could never know enough, to a position that could be held by them, that they too could know the world and act on it. They took to themselves the position of the knower who does, or the subject who acts on the world, and rejected the position of the object that is always acted on. Formulating the position of the knower in a way that was understandable to everyone then, made finding a metaphor that could communicate that common understanding important. They led to the common use of the metaphor of the family to explain how to run an organization—but as we all know, that metaphor has quite different implications, and means quite different things, for women and men. I will return to this later.

What the tent equally taught the workers was how valuable each of them was for each other, how much they needed each other, how differences which had previously mattered, were no longer important: “we worked together like ants, you couldn’t tell who was the man and who the woman” said one woman to me. When the women talked about being ants together, they meant that everyone was together, women and men. The women didn’t mean that they were the same as the men or each other, but that there were no hierarchies, including sexual hierarchies. There were reasons, then, why the workers kept emphasizing to me that “we are a co-op”: we pay everyone the same, if we defer to others, we will not be able to work together fully and completely.

However, the experience of ‘the tent’ seemed to have much greater implications for the women than for the men in terms of their sense of equal worth: the women felt equal to the men, and it was the women who emphasized their equality with men. In the women’s accounts to me when we were apart from the men, they emphasized the shared experience of the tent as eliminating not only hierarchical work relations, but also the patriarchal relations or sexual hierarchies between men and women that worked to subvert the egalitarian ways of working together which the shared experience of the tent inspired. The converse didn’t seem to be true: the men never mentioned feeling equal to the women. The women felt equal to the men, but this equality between the two sexes that the women perceived ‘in the tent’, remained invisible to the men<sup>vi</sup>. What exactly, then, did ‘we worked together like ants’ mean for the women and for the men? How were sameness, difference, and equality interpreted in how they organized to get work done together in cooperative ways? This difference between the two sexes informs the next part of the paper.

### **III. No head of the household, but sisterhood; workers, but not brotherhood: Reconstructing the patriarchal family in rethinking democratic decision-making, conflict, and the role of the coordinators by the workers**

The most common way of describing the arrangements to get work done was referring to the metaphor of ‘the family’ by both women and men. But like ‘the tent’, ‘the family’ was perceived in different ways by the women and by the men. In a patriarchal society the metaphor of ‘the family’ has quite different implications for women than for men: think of what ‘the head of the household’ might mean for women and for men, or ‘sisterhood’ or ‘brotherhood’ or ‘parents’ to the two sexes. What did the metaphor of ‘the family’ mean, then, for the construction of an egalitarian, contiguous workplace for the two sexes? How do they deal with power in their organizing processes, in the “micro-inequities” (Rowe, 1995; Fletcher & Meyerson, 2000), of who has power and who doesn’t, if we accept that power circulates in our acts of organizing and in the names we give those acts, in the process either confirming or subverting the circulation of hierarchy and patriarchy within those symbolic structures? In particular, how have the workers dealt with the fact that they are not sexless individuals but men and women who experience the processes of organizing differently, who occupy different positions in a patriarchal society and who act and then define those actions within a hierarchical symbolic structure? What are the answers to these questions in terms of the key aspects of non-hierarchical, contiguous, participatory organizing, and how are they embodied in the organizing processes of women and men? What does it mean to figure out how to make decisions, how to deal with conflict, what the coordinator does, what aspect of ‘the family’ the coordinator embodies, and in particular, what that means for women and for men working together?

To illuminate this question I will be drawing Rothschild’s (2000) analysis of how cooperative, non-hierarchical organizing works, as well as drawing on a study of the worker coops of Buenos Aires by Raimbeau (2005, 2006). Although neither of these studies of non-hierarchical cooperative organizing looked specifically at the relations between women and men, what they have done is to provide signposts about what is important in figuring out how to work together collectively and non-hierarchically, even if they didn’t specifically confront how patriarchy works covertly to reinstate hierarchical forms of organizing, and how those patriarchal processes might be subverted.

Both studies concurred on the key aspects of the non-hierarchical workplace. Raimbeau asserted that there is a direct link between the consciousness-raising of

the tent and the workers' commitment to democratic forms of organizing that are the outcome of that shared experience. She identified the following elements as crucial: "the assembly, where every worker has a voice", the election of non-permanent coordinators who are rotated in and out of their positions, equal pay, and "mechanisms to guarantee transparent accounting"(2005, p. 11). Rothschild's (2000) analysis replicates Raimbeau's. In her summary of how to organize cooperatively, Rothschild points out that this mode of organizing is comprised of four essential elements: worker self-management, a non-instrumental way of dealing with each other as workers, democratic decision-making with provision for dissent, and worker ownership, which guarantees the democratic process (cf. Blasi and Kruse, 2003)<sup>vii</sup>. It's not enough to ensure worker participation, Rothschild argues. Workers must benefit through ownership of their work; they must be in control of their work, and the split between the owners, managers, and workers must be erased through the position of the elected coordinator<sup>viii</sup>.

## **Decision Making and Conflict Resolution**

So how do the workers struggle with the basic processes of organizing of figuring out what is going on, what to do, how to do it, who is going to do it, and who's going to evaluate what's been done and how, using what criteria? How do they solve conflicts over these decisions? Rothschild's and Raimbeau's analyses of the necessary components to non-hierarchical organizing were replicated by what the workers told me about their general assemblies, where workers using majority rules decided on how the money was going to be spent, elected coordinators, made decisions on task rotation and on opportunities for education and training, and decided on the criteria for how to evaluate each other as workers. One group explained to me that: "We have an [upside down pyramid]--the base is what decides, and direction is given to management [in the general assembly]. The administrative council takes the decision as the result of assembly majority plus one". When I asked why they had chosen to organize in this way, the men answered that: "We had to organize in some way, because everything was a mess. At that moment we decided to use a majority. Many times we don't agree with the majority, but we have to accept. It's not a matter of being happy or unhappy. We have to accept the majority. The votes are what rules". Another man pointed out to me that 'If you have an idea you put it forward, but if the answer is no, you learn to lose. I have to lower my head, respect my companions'. When I asked what the assembly decides--everything?—the men emphasized that what was really important was not only that the general assembly made all the decisions, but that "Cooperating, showing solidarity to others, is the basic tenet. We don't do as the owners used to do. They used to pay by level. We all get the same salary. We do everything the opposite way to the owner. A factory without workers

does not exist. But a factory with workers exists”. It was the process that was primary to them.

Compared to the men, the women’s analysis of conflict over decisions was both much more tied to the egalitarian structure of the coops and much more personal. The men talked about the rule of the majority, and ‘lowering one’s head’, a phrase I never heard the women use. The women spoke, not about what they did as individuals, but about how the egalitarian way the cooperative was structured made it possible for them to bring up problems, if necessary to fight with the men, and overall to struggle to advance the cooperative. They spoke with relish to me how the men “tremble” when they walk into the general assembly. This was something that I had heard before, by women in another coop, of the strength and fearlessness of the women. In this coop it was the women, not the men, who did whatever was necessary, including begging on the street in order that the coop could survive, something the women told me the men could not bring themselves to do. The women knew they were strong, and what they as women had managed to do meant that they would not take a back seat to the men. They would confront them, fight with the men, when they felt it was necessary, when they had to. When I asked one group of women workers in a male dominated factory how they spoke in their general assembly, they told me that: We “are bold, very frontal, very honest--more than the men. Sometimes the truth hurts. Many, many times we put out the machines without packaging. One more person makes a difference and men allow things to happen and then we have a fight with the men. We can speak out because it’s a coop. The men make the struggle through us. We speak and we get things for everyone. Three or four of us are the ones here who speak out—it’s easier to argue here than in an ordinary factory”. They told me that in the general assembly, they wanted more women on the administrative council, that it’s “Nine or ten women against 100 men. It becomes difficult, but we’re fighters, we talk more. We dot the i’s on the men. We come close to administrative council, they tremble when we go as a gang”.

The women also spoke to me about fighting with each other but then drinking mate, a communal drink that must be passed from person to person--it cannot be drunk alone. For the women, the repair of the relationship was integral; if women disagreed with each other, they could fight, but then they drank mate together. They didn’t go home in a huff. As they emphasized to me, mate is an inclusive ritual; it is a way both literal and figurative to repair a relationship which has been marred by arguing. They told me: “We argue in associate meetings, but then we argue and forget. We might not agree with how they work, but I drink mate [with them] twenty minutes later. We drink mate together. There are some people who are very resentful. Sometimes with the afternoon shift we argue [they were the morning shift]. Our section together: we

are all sisters. We've known each other for a long time". Interestingly, I never heard the men use the term 'brotherhood'; it was only the women that would refer to each other as sisters, or as a sisterhood. The only term I heard the men use was 'family' as in we are a family. 'Sisterhood' indicated the strong bond between those who are different from the dominant majority; 'family' was a much more ambiguous term, and prefigured in both senses the different ways the men and the women described the role of the coordinator, or the bridge in the phrase 'more than workers' to 'less than bosses'

### **The role of the coordinator**

When I asked about the role of the elected coordinators—the workers never used the term 'manager' -- how they were chosen, and what they do, a male worker explained it to me like this: "The workers know when it begins and ends. Those who knew, they were the ones who became coordinators. The qualified officer knows how to do everything, but she still works on the machine because she's so fast". There is no hesitation about informing me that the coordinators are elected, and serve, through the will of the general assembly: One worker told me that: "Some coordinators are from the beginning of 2002 and we will vote them out when they're too old, or too lazy". Most of the elected coordinators seemed to meet roughly once a week, and as one worker put it, decide on everything. As the worker went on to explain: "They make a diagram about what we have to buy. Almost once a week they meet, and see what is lacking in each sector, what's needed in each sector: missing staff, cleanliness, the kitchen: everything must come up". That meant areas of contention which the coordinators had to deal with, and when I asked how they dealt with this, they used the metaphor of the family: "When there's a problem in the house, the parents get together. We try not to cut heads off, to scold". When I asked in another coop how long the meetings were, they told me that they were one to two hours, and they talked about "how are the deposits going, how are the floors, the washroom cleaning, reception, the bar. The music [which they were not allowed to have before] makes it easier to work; it's easier to talk to the suppliers. It's different affinities, like any family".

Women workers in a workplace dominated by men, however, had a different approach to the duties of the coordinator. The other workplaces had told me about what the coordinator in very matter of fact tones, but they never questioned why there needed to be a coordinator in the first place: the family metaphor they used indicated that the position of a coordinator was necessary, like a parent or the head of a household. However, this group of women workers did. Unlike in other coops where it was more evenly split between women and men, or where women dominated, this group of

women spoke the most specifically to me about what it was like to work in a male dominated coop, and how that extended to how they saw their coordinator, and what terms they used to describe what the coordinator did.

When I asked how the women organized among themselves, one woman first pointed out their fundamental equality with each other, that: “Yes: from the beginning we are a coop”. Although they had been working together, they told me, since 1985 for some, 1983, 1984 for others, some daughters, and granddaughters now working with the original workers, the coop was different. When I asked how?, they told me: “We don’t have bosses. Before we were told. Now we work, we do it for us, it’s more of a sisterhood. We have a salary. It’s ours, we do more, we’re more careful, because it’s ours. We’re more conscious”. When I asked how has that had affected their lives?, they told me:

You wake up with more energy. You know you are working for yourself. Sometimes we wake up with such energy we come an hour late [and they all laughed]. “But we always try to be on time but before....It looks like others have never been late [and they all laugh]. We cover ourselves, [we use] the cell phone. We cover here when it happens with someone. We are alone, we’re single mothers with young children. We continue to work after [we finish here], we’re up at midnight still working, and up at four am. We have to do two jobs. It’s more flexible, we still have responsibilities, we talk among our companions.

The women also complained to me how busy they were, how they had to do everything, despite having less time than the men, who did not have their double day. “Here, to kick out an associate [their term for another worker] there has to be previous sanctions, you can’t be irresponsible. We are more responsible than men, but we have to do everything, because men have more time”. What hampered them was that they had to be fully contributing workers who took on to themselves all the responsibilities of being fully participatory workers, but because they were single mothers, they told me, they had all the extra responsibilities of their families which the men simply did not have, and that made it harder for them to do all that they needed to do.

When I asked what the coordinator did, the women didn’t speak of any involvement by the coordinator in deciding what to do and how to do it. Instead they stressed that the coordinator fulfilled the role of information transmitter between the various departments because the coordinator “knows the orders and priorities with the warehouse, the warehouse coordinator tells the needs of packaging”. It was they who decided what to do and how to do it, not him: “One day we each take turns, to switch the job so it’s not so routine and that way we learn everything”. When I asked why

they did that, they replied that it was necessary “to learn other things to help each other so we can cover for each other”. They also told me that they didn’t really need a coordinator, since they made all the decisions themselves, including the rotation of tasks in order to cover for each other, and that they kept the coordinator only because he needed the job, he was old, and they didn’t want to hurt his feelings. They kept him on, but they decided among themselves what a coordinator usually decided: who did what, and when. They ensured that the flexibility they required as single parents, on their own, with unpredictable demands, was there. They knew how to do each other’s jobs—that way they could cover for each other. And they figured out among themselves who could cover. They told me that:

We don’t have a female coordinator but we don’t need either a male or a female coordinator. Among us we could rotate the job of coordinator. Every business has to have a coordinator who meets with the administrative council [elected in the general assembly]. Supposedly the coordinator is voted in, but here the coordinator was chosen because he had the experience—twenty-five years. But he doesn’t have to be there always—he could be taken out. There could be a coordinator, but we love him, we fight with him, he’s been here so long we don’t want to push him out.

But they were quite adamant to me that a coordinator, another layer in the hierarchy, was someone they didn’t need, in the same way they didn’t need husbands. Just as they were able to cope with unemployment first, and then later the work of recovering the factory without the help of husbands—most of them were single parents, with responsibilities to children and parents--they couldn’t see why they needed a coordinator to tell them what to do. Instead they told me that they just figured out how to get everything done between themselves so the line was never held up. They told me that they didn’t need a ‘head of the household’, a term they reserved for married men. They never called themselves heads, although they had responsibilities for others younger and older than themselves; it was as if there was no word for their position for what they needed to accomplish. Just as they refused to use the term ‘head of the household’ because they felt it was not applicable to what they did, or needed to do, neither was a coordinator necessary. They didn’t need anybody to tell them what to do, either at home, or at work, in order for things to go smoothly. Instead their solution to how they organized—which explicitly rejected any form of hierarchy—was not father, not mother, not ‘head of household, nor even parent, but sister or sisterhood.

#### **IV. Conclusion: The metaphor of the family and challenging a patriarchal hierarchy**

To emphasize the common experience, to reiterate that everyone can do this, because everyone already knows how to do this, the constant, reoccurring metaphor used by the workers was the family, parents, the household, the home, sisterhood--but not brotherhood. The workers used these metaphors to talk about how to become more than a worker, but not a boss, they used these metaphors in terms of deciding what to do and how to do it, or how to organize as equals, since they were all paid the same. They used the metaphor to describe how to budget, how to deal with those who didn't know how to do the work well, how to deal with disagreements over how much money to take home and how much money to spend on capital improvements, how to establish rules about what to do and who was to do them and how they were to be done.

The women in one of the factories were the most notable in how they used the family metaphor to frame what they were doing at work. They never used the term 'the head of the household', which they reserved for married men although they talked about their responsibilities as more onerous than those facing married men (they emphasized they worked 20 hours a day in order to meet all their responsibilities). Instead, they talked about their responsibilities as single mothers to their children and to their parents without ever defining that as 'the head of the household', which extended to how they saw their relations at work. They spoke of the coordinator as unnecessary for what they wanted to accomplish, just as they saw using the term the head of the family as unnecessary for what they wanted to accomplish in terms of meeting their responsibilities to their dependent others. In both their analyses of their place at home and at work, they did not use the hierarchical terms available to them to designate their place; they talked in other ways about their responsibilities at work and at home. Just as they never saw themselves as heads of families despite stating that they had more responsibilities than the married men they called 'heads of families' since their wives did the work in the home which they were responsible for, neither did they see how they got work done together as hierarchical. Instead they used the term 'sisterhood', stating that they didn't need a coordinator in order to get things done at work. In refusing to use the term the head of the household, they also refused to use any form of hierarchical address at work, while they continued to deal with the myriad responsibilities of both being income earners for others and income earners in their workplace.

#### **Confronting Patriarchal Privilege in the Workplace**

If our goal is the democratic, egalitarian workplace, we have to focus on the relations between women and men. If we want democracy, and some version of a non-hierarchical workplace where people participate, we have to analyse people in terms of who has power and who doesn't, men and women who have different positions within the societal structure, where men are dominant and women are subordinate, maintained by patriarchy and reinforced by hierarchical ways of organizing that are not necessarily confronted in a democracy. Without an analysis of sexual difference there is no means of figuring out how women and men experience the processes of organizing differently. As we know, our Canadian democracy does not have proportional representation of women: men represent women and speak on their behalf, and it's certainly been argued that men legislate for themselves, not for women. This underlies that what happens in our legislatures carries over to our organizations, as Rothschild notes: "rights in the political arena cannot be insulated from rights in the workplace"(2000, p. 195). Rothschild's real question is whether the team based approach so emphasized recently in the US as the way to do things is a preliminary to a "much more deeply democratic forms of control"(p. 196) whereas I maintain that democratic control is only possible when men and women confront patriarchy, that dismantling hierarchy, the control by a few of the many, means nothing if women are ignored in this equation. Ultimately, if we take difference seriously as difference next to difference rather than difference as lesser than the same, the compulsion of Canadian federalism which continuously struggles to figure out politically the non-substitutable next to the non-substitutable rather than the sameness of individuals, which only obscures who has power and who doesn't<sup>ix</sup>, we have to dismantle hierarchy and patriarchy simultaneously, since hierarchy and patriarchy work to reinforce each other, and neither is possible without the other, Irigaray's argument. Only dismantling our hierarchical and patriarchal symbolic structures through contiguous practices which are then defined will women be free from symbolic structures that constantly work to reaffirm women's subordinate status.

We need to be able to create a word to describe how we work together contiguously, not just leaving that space blank, the way we do now, when we refer to men as heads of families and by extension heads of organization, reserving for women only an unfilled space in the symbolic structure because the word to define contiguous organizing has not yet been created. Only then will women no longer be admitted into the public sphere only as honorary men in the guise of the [masculine] neutral, which hides what it cannot admit, that the world of the public remains resolutely masculine, and women continue to be admitted into this masculine sphere of the public and the workplace only as honorary men. Only by struggling with patriarchy can cooperative organizing be created, since the family, the household, sisterhood, were recurring motifs in the interviews, dominant metaphors used to explain how to organize

democratically. What we need finally, are new ways of understanding the family metaphor as contiguous, with a female subject and male subject, rather than patriarchal and hierarchical, with a male subject and a female object, the head of the household as the unacknowledged unanalyzed right of the male to rule, and the erased woman, never even referred to. What the women of the coop were searching for, a word in Spanish translatable into English that would capture their egalitarian, contiguous way of working, still awaits us. Democracy in the workplace that does not confront the covert practices of patriarchal privilege ultimately subverts that democracy. Egalitarianism can only succeed when sexual difference is both confronted and created as contiguous, as women and men next to the next, side by side, working together in the factory coops of Buenos Aires.

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Print Shop, Glass, Balloon, Clothing Factory Interviews, Hotel Interview

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<sup>i</sup> These are Sky Masterson's famous words in 'Guys and Dolls', whose name itself exemplifies Irigaray's analysis. For more on Irigaray's analysis of the sexually indifferent symbolic structures and the necessity of creating a space for sexual difference and the female subject, see in particular *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), also 1994, 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> At the turn of the last century, Argentina was richer than Canada (Martin, 1999-2000). However, by 2004, GDP per person in terms of purchasing power parity, Argentina ranked just below Poland, at about \$12,500 per year, and above Chile at just over \$10,000 and Mexico, at just less than \$10,000 (The Economist, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006, page 102). In another comparison of Argentina to Spain and to South Korea, and "[m]easured in terms of per capita income and debt, Argentina has gone from being the richest of the three to the poorest in the last 20 years, and its position relative to Spain and south Korea is deteriorating" (Schaeffer, 2003, p. 854-856). For more information on the worker cooperatives see the CBC documentary *The Take*, (2004), directed by Avi Lewis on the worker cooperatives in Buenos Aires; also Allbert, 2005; Balch, 2005; Guillen, 2001; Huff-Hannon, 2004; The Economist, 2002; Valente, 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> To Mutterburgh: "coop success depends not upon getting incentive structures right, but on successfully negotiating the social milieu which coops are embedded" (2002, p. 771).

<sup>iv</sup> Trigona states that "In almost all cases workers took over businesses that had been abandoned or closed by their owners in the midst of Argentina's financial meltdown in 2001. The owners usually ceased production, stopped paying wages, and went bankrupt. The workers' decision to take over their plant was a decision made out of necessity—not necessarily out of ideology. The clear worry of how to safeguard workers' jobs motivated the act of taking over a factory and making it produce without a boss or owner (unpagged, 2006). This process was called 'recovering' the factories.

<sup>v</sup> Morgan, 2006, is one of many organizational theorists who have critiqued hierarchy for its necessary emphasis on control and on narrow, top down forms of decision making. See also Iannello, 1992; Jones & Svejnar, 1985; Lennie, 1999; Newman, 1980; Oseen, 1997a, b, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2005; Semler, 1993; Surowiecki, 2005.

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<sup>vi</sup> This is the point that Elizabeth Sundin (2000) has made in her analyses of the workplace: that women want to do men's jobs, but men do not want to do women's jobs, and will leave rather than do jobs that women now do.

<sup>vii</sup> Rothschild points out that in the TQM [total quality management] literature, the nearest to the study of cooperative organizing in mainstream organizational analysis, the focus is on "how the people in the organization feel". In contrast, in the democratic cooperative literature it is on how "actual ownership and control that is extended. It is the ownership that provides the legal foundation to ensure that democratic control will continue"(p. 200).

<sup>viii</sup> Like Rothschild, Blasi and Kruse stress that "employee participation isn't enough. The tangible rewards of employee ownership or some form of sharing the fruits of ownership must go hand in hand with work practices that give workers greater decision-making" (Blasi and Kruse, cited in Surowiecki, 2004, p. 210).

<sup>ix</sup> See for some recent writings on the different next to the different in Canadian federalism, see Atwood & V-L. Beaulieu, 1998; Welsh, 2004.