

## **More than Workers, Less than Bosses: Five worker cooperatives in Buenos Aires struggle to create the egalitarian workplace in the face of hierarchy and patriarchy**

### **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 symbolic structures, but which we must think if we are to confront how patriarchy and hierarchy mutually reinforce each other<sup>ii</sup>,<sup>iii</sup>. 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 participatory, contiguous or side by side ways to get things done<sup>iii</sup>. Without confronting this ruse of the [masculine] neutral, or the rhetoric of the individual without a sex who is in reality 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>iv</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)? 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>v</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, that, following Irigaray, women and men are not substitutable--that they are equals who are different, 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?

This focus on how patriarchal privilege circulates within and further cements hierarchical organizing processes, of course, depends on Irigaray's analysis of the lack of representation of sexual difference in our symbolic structures (1985, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 2000, 2004). She argues that our symbolic structures, or the philosophies, religions, myths, stories and words through which we define and give voice to our actions, only have a place for the ostensibly neutral—but a neutral which is in reality male. This is a philosophical sleight of hand which cements in place through the stories, the myths, the words that are available to us, the reign of the same over the different, the ostensibly sexually indifferent (but symbolically male) subject over the ostensibly sexually indifferent (but symbolically female) object. This reign of the (masculine) neutral is a hierarchical relationship which has no place for contiguity, for the sexually different next to the sexually different, no way to acknowledge sexual difference, that there are two sexes, two subjects, two *cogitos*<sup>vi</sup> which must be represented in our symbolic structures. Instead difference is denied, and the pretense remains that we are all the same. It is a pretense that states that we sexually indifferent, that we are sexually neutral, a pretense which functions to erase the fact of male privilege which circulates within these symbolic structures, substituting the recognition of sexual difference next to sexual difference for sexual indifference and this ruse of the [masculine] neutral.

If, however, we are to confront the hidden privilege of the masculine neutral, what we must recognize is the reality of the two, or the sexually different next to the sexually different, what Irigaray in her essay *Sexual Difference* has memorably termed 'the question of the age that must be thought' (Whitford, ed., 1991, p. 165). We have yet to think through what sexual difference means in terms of our philosophies, our myths, the stories and words we use to make sense of our world and how we should act within that, what sexual difference means in terms of the public space, and by extension our organizations and our ways of organizing. It means thinking through and beyond the place that is reserved for women in the public space--of which the workplace is one--where women are only admitted in the guise of the masculine neutral, where our collective nouns can only refer to "my fellow Canadians", to give just one example of many, where men are admitted in their own right to the public space, and women are admitted only as honorary men. What Irigaray points out, however, is that our symbolic structures exist because we have created them, and we can change those structures through our actions and then in the way we define those actions. In our actions of contiguity, of working together as equals who are not the same, and then defining those contiguous actions in new ways which do not replicate the dominance of the [masculine] neutral, we change our symbolic structures, we create a place for the female subject next to the male subject, for sexual difference next to sexual difference, for difference next to difference, rather than difference always and inevitably lesser than the same.

In the remainder 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 attempted to confront those hierarchical and patriarchal processes--

each working to reinforce 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 led to a sense of politicized consciousness or awareness of their situation, and then how those shared experiences led to their commitment to egalitarian ways of organizing as they struggled to confront the workings of hierarchy in all its forms, as Raimbeau argues (2005). This analysis rests on how the workers conceptualized equality, and whether these egalitarian ways of organizing could be achieved through emphasizing that everyone must be the same<sup>vii</sup>, or if they are different, they must be lesser, and equality could be achieved only if everyone is the same as everyone else. Concurrently, and inextricably intertwined with the first question, I want to examine how the workers confronted how patriarchy—or sexual hierarchy—circulated within the ostensibly egalitarian organizing processes they put in place. This, again, is a question that rests on how the workers conceptualized equality, sameness and difference. Could they embody in their actions and in the words they chose to define those actions, the egalitarian or contiguous organizing of the different next to the different, sexual difference next to sexual difference, without consigning difference to the position of lesser? Were they able to recognize sexual difference as contiguous in order to create the egalitarian workplace? Or did they maintain the ruse of sexual indifference, the belief that women and men experience organizing exactly the same, a ruse that permits the continued reign of the masculine neutral in all its hierarchical forms? How did they understand the achievement of equality, as the imposition of sameness, or the acknowledgment of [sexual] difference next to [sexual] difference in all their organizing practices and processes? Was it necessary for the women to be the same as men--to be erased--in order to be equal to men?

## **II. ‘In the tent’: The development of 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>viii</sup>. However, they used a much more concrete term. The workers called this the experience of the tent, 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). At the same time it was a process of politicized consciousness-raising that enabled the workers there “to gain a greater sense of self-worth, agency and common purpose” (Young, 1997, p. 370). And importantly for this study, 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: so the women felt equal to the men, and it was the women who emphasized their equality with men. However, 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, remained invisible to the men. The men never talked about it<sup>ix</sup>. This difference between the two sexes informs the paper.

For the workers who shared this experience of revolt, a shared experience which created political consciousness or ‘political subjects’ (Raimbeau, 2005), people who saw what they had not seen before, who understood differently from what they had understood before, the experience of the tent created a sense of possibility and of capacity: they understood that they were far more capable than they knew; they learned their strength, their capacity, what they were capable of, was so much more than they thought, and what they had been led to believe, a similar emphasis repeated in other analyses of participatory, inclusive, non-hierarchical organizing. Brown (1992) and Lewis and Barnsley (1992) equally emphasize the importance of consciousness raising or de-mystification of who has power and who doesn’t, an importance also stressed by Young (1993, 1997) and Guijt and Shah (1998) in their studies of participatory economic development. Deciding together what is really going on is identified as crucial to the development of non-hierarchical organizing by all these authors, whether they term it consciousness raising (Brown), politically situated consciousness raising or the shared experience of revolt (Raimbeau), or de-mystification (Young; Lewis and Barnsley; and Guijt and Shah). What the workers (and most had been workers; only 20% of those who joined the recovered factory movement had been managers)<sup>x</sup> had to unlearn was deference and passivity, the result of a hierarchical way of working divided between managers/owners and workers that Morgan (2006) along many others argues<sup>xi</sup> creates passivity, dependence, competitiveness and deference. 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.

One woman recounted her experience with the others in the tent, linking the spur of necessity, to the necessity of hope. She talked about how what they managed to do—rethink their place in the world—they did because they were together, how they overcame the fear of never having another job by figuring out that they could and would make work for themselves through recovering the factory. She told me that there were at:

first three women, then men, then the rest. We did the transport of the machinery in parts. We were tired from early on, we started to unload the vans ourselves. We didn’t wait for the news. The men unloaded the vans. Sometimes it would be just women who stayed in the tent at night. We women stayed, because we could make other arrangements. There was a soup kitchen which fed us—but 50 blocks away. For almost 10 months, from March 2004 to January 2005, we were out of work for 10 months, on only 150 pesos a month, just enough to [barely eat]. In the case of the women, they depended on their parents. We stayed and drank mate, but we didn’t really have enough to eat. We were hungry, cold. Sometimes we wanted to give it all up, but in spite of everything we had hope. Four left, they left, and have not come back. Their abandonment hurt us, but if they came now, everything is done, now the worst is over. If you’re over 35 nobody wants you. Most of us here are more than 35, that gives an extra kind of push.

Her account was similar to a male colleague’s, who told me in more apocalyptic terms how they had no choice but to defend what they had done “to the death”, that no one was going to take away what they had managed to do, that the degradation of not having work, not feeding their families, was something they could not and would not return to.

Another woman emphasized how important the demystification of consciousness-raising was to her understanding of the situation, that it helped her understand not only what she was doing, but why she was doing it: “I know I was struggling for something dignified. It’s ugly to occupy something

that is not yours, but I'll never regret what I did". A woman from another coop stressed that consciousness raising was not only an individual process, but a process which had to be extended to the others they were connected to, that the others had to understand if they were going to succeed and that they alone could not be the only ones to see what was really going on. If the workers were going to succeed, they had to have the support of their families, but it was the women who talked to me about how crucial this support was to their success; the men never mentioned this. As she pointed out, "We are the majority, 90% women, 10% men, it was our struggle which was renewed. It was very hard for us, to leave the children, the husband, the home, there was a lot of family conflicts, lots of broken homes, until the family became conscious that they had to form part of the struggle. Women have to do their work, and then go home [and do another job]. And then get up and go to work. And that's when the situation was a bit ugly at first".

One woman also pointed out to me how important it was that ongoing consciousness-raising continues in the face of threat, and how it produces solidarity. When I asked how worker solidarity and work could be maintained when their worker coop remains under threat of closure or takeover by others, she told me that: "We have a lot of legal problems, we march, we all wear the shirt, we sing and shout, we have to fight. We've had three shut-downs. I was living in here [at the worker coop], but right away when the telephone rang, our supporters came. It's very unstable, the police beat me". When I asked: 'How can you continue to organize in the face of this extreme instability and the constant threat of being closed down?', she stressed the capability of the workers: "On the contrary, this makes it stronger, that we can maintain our jobs, our challenge is to indicate to society that workers can do this". As she underlined to me, the consciousness raising which the workers spoke of demystified what they were capable of doing; they kept saying that they could do this, which they had not had the opportunity before to find out. So not only did threat make the workers stronger, it also revealed their capabilities, as another worker pointed out. There was quite a bit of talk about how the workers showed the world and themselves what they were capable of, in a way that they themselves were not even aware of: "the bar was the first to be fixed, it was rubble, we couldn't do anything they said, but we showed that we were able". This new sense of what they were capable of also worked later to demystify planning, decision making, strategizing, because it served both to cement the sense that 'we' are in this together, and that 'I' can do this: Consciousness-raising operated both on the individual as well as on the collective level; it prepared them for working together because their experience cemented that they were all in this together. By strengthening their bonds, their experiences also strengthened their commitment to democracy and egalitarianism.

The workers referred to the phrase 'we had to learn to be more than workers and less than bosses' again and again, since it seemed there was no simple noun available to them to describe what it was that they wanted to accomplish: to create and define a non-hierarchical relationship between those who decided together what to do as they continued to do the work, the chief element of a cooperative workplace (Brown, 1992; Rothschild, 2000). What they were searching for was—literally—a collective noun for a public space where each worker could occupy equally, without mandating that each worker be the same as the other, or substitutable one for the other. In this non-hierarchical workplace which they were trying to create, and which they lacked the words to easily describe, they could rotate their jobs—but that only emphasized their capabilities, not that they were all the same. The workers talked to me about how they developed a way of working that embodied an understanding of equality that did not depend on the sameness of their jobs for fairness or equality. As one worker stressed to me: "We're going to produce as much as we can, we've decided. We've

got about 100 suppliers, about 140-150 companions—we are all workers. We're not employees/employers; 'we are all equal'. The cleaners, we all are equals". Jobs were equal, pay was equal, workers were equal—but I never heard in all this talk of equality, anyone explicitly state that women were equal to men. They talked of workers: 'we're all equal'; to talk of women and men would have led to the same leaden construction that accompanied the singling out of 'the cleaners—we all are equals'. To speak of cleaners was as far as the workers were willing to go in their pursuit of equality.

This focus on equality, equal jobs, equal pay, equal workers, also meant that the later workers who had not experienced 'the tent' needed to know how changed the original workers were by their experiences together. If the workers were going to organize in egalitarian ways what happened in the tent had to be taught to others. This transmission of knowledge was ongoing—it was an experience that provided a framework, a *raison d'être* for what the workers decided to do, and why they were going to do it. Politically situated consciousness-raising, or demystification, then, was not something that happened to the workers as individuals; it was a collective grasp of the situation that could be taught to organizational newcomers. The consciousness raising experienced in the tent had an importance that transcended the time spent in the tent by those who were there; it became a way of strengthening not only the bonds of those who were in the tent but those who followed. This consciousness raising, then, was not only about insight and solidarity. It also became the exemplification of a process of providing a story through which other workers could come to understand what was really happening, what was really going on, what was reality. In other words, and paradoxically, this demystification of reality—that workers were not incapable, but powerless—in turn became its own source of myth-making—that workers were both powerful and capable. What was experienced in the tent, then, was to be taught to the others who did not experience it, since what the tent taught was insight and solidarity, in the process creating "new political subjects, or politicized workers" (Raimbeau, 2005, p. 11).

However, as one worker pointed out to me, insight, solidarity and politicization didn't happen to everyone: "The people who come later, there are some that understand it, some it takes longer". It was an analysis echoed by one funder, who noted parenthetically, "It's easier to recover the factory than recover the man". This was reiterated by another worker, who told me that: "People who came from outside to interview us think we have the same consciousness. It's very few of us who are conscious". This sense of the difficulty acquiring consciousness reappeared when I asked what was the biggest challenge for the workers. One worker replied that "there are companions who are clear, we have a worker controlled place. Others still think that it's three pm and they don't have a class consciousness". This was a process of learning how to be equally responsible which takes time, as those in the cooperatives emphasized in their various accounts of how raising the consciousness of all, something that they had learned in the tent, had to be extended to all those who they worked with if the cooperative was going to be successful. One worker pointed out, "we're not under an owner, but it's difficult to make them understand they're not under an owner, to learn initiative, responsibility". Another pointed out to me about how workers were taught to think as 'more than workers', to take responsibility: "You can never say 'they've become conscious', we have to continually repeat the training, it's never finished. Be conscious, once and for all, because in a house, as a woman you always had to do your housework. When you have a clean house you feel like sitting down, but not if it's dirty". One ended by stating: "We all share the same visions, which is to work, and create your own salary. We are working and our work is not a gift: we own our

work". It was an explicit statement underlining how important it was to the success of the cooperative to eliminate the distinction between doing the work and owning the work : all had to recognize that they couldn't sit down until the house was clean; they couldn't leave at three pm and think that the mythical 'someone else' was going to do it. They all had to learn responsibility, accountability, to recognize, as another worker stated: "The sense of freedom we feel is incredible. But we don't all have the same attitude. Some see this as a chance to do what they want, others see it as a chance to do nothing. That's the hardest part of worker management: you have to struggle against individualism and inertia. We've got to teach ourselves to be more than just workers, without turning into bosses"[Raimbeau, 2005, pg.11].

What 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 which is always acted on.

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". 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, this sense of equality, and the dismantling of all hierarchies among and between the workers, was not shared equally by both the women and the men. In their accounts to me the women when they were alone, 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. This, however, was not something that the men mentioned to me, either when they were with the women

or when they were alone. In this next section I will address how well the workers, women and men together, were able to confront the ways that hierarchy and patriarchy continually worked together to subvert egalitarian organizing processes, and what they did, and did not do, in order to create and maintain the egalitarian ways of working together which arose from their shared experience in the tent. What exactly 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?

### **III. ‘We are a family’: Democratic decision-making by the workers and their struggle with patriarchy**

In this part of the paper I want to examine how the underlying principles of cooperative organizing identified by Raimbeau (2005, 2006), Rothschild (2000) and Brown (1992) in their respective studies are exemplified in the organizing processes of the worker coops, or what workers actually do to bring about contiguous or side by side organizing<sup>xii</sup>. This part, then, examines the how as it is related to the what, or how the workers actually get work done together without a hierarchy, without bosses--or how they become ‘more than workers, less than bosses’. This also means that the workers’ ways of relating to each other at work, or their structuring of human relations, determines whether egalitarian ways of working together among and between women and men are possible or not, since egalitarian ways of working together are inseparable from egalitarian relations among and between women and men. What was interesting here is how often the workers referred to ‘the family’ when they were explaining how they got work done. In a patriarchal society this is a metaphor with quite different implications for women than for men: think of what ‘the head of the household’ might mean, or ‘sisterhood’ or ‘brotherhood’ or ‘parents’ to the two sexes, and which I will be analyzing further for what those terms mean for the construction of an egalitarian, contiguous workplace for the two sexes.

Although none of these three major studies of non-hierarchical 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. It remains, then, for the workers, the women and men in the Buenos Aires worker cooperatives I interviewed, to enlighten us about what they did: how they struggled with the actual processes of non-hierarchical organizing, and how they struggled with patriarchy as it circulated through these ostensibly egalitarian processes. In particular, I want to focus on how the workers, the women and men, made decisions: how they decided what to do and how to do it, who was going to do it, and how the work was to be evaluated and paid, using what criteria to determine value to the organization and to decide what to do next, while keeping in the forefront their struggle with all forms of hierarchies, including patriarchy, in their determination to be egalitarian in how they got work done<sup>xiii</sup>.

All three studies concurred on the key aspects of the non-hierarchical workplace. Raimbeau asserted that 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; a point similarly emphasized by Blasi and Kruse<sup>xiv</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<sup>xv</sup>. She stresses that “[i]n the completely self managed workplace, those who work will also manage their work completely, those who manage will also be doing the task work....A decision is considered legitimate only when all of the participants who will be affected by it have had an opportunity to participate in making it”(Ibid, p. 196). And as she points out, workers must choose from their ranks those who coordinate their work: “[m]ost basically, democratized organizations reject justifications for top down control: when authority is delegated, it is delegated for a specific term and it is subject to recall by the collectivity” (Ibid, p. 200). To Rothschild, workplace democracy is embodied in the practices of workers who decide themselves in the general assemblies what to do, when to do it, and how, who decide how workers will be paid and evaluated, on the allocation of money and other resources, on training and cross training, hiring and firing, on which technology to use and how to use it so they are skilled, not deskilled, and who elect managers from their own ranks who rotate in and out of coordinator [rather than managerial] positions. All of this, she points out, depends on workers who are trained in “conflict resolution and democratic decision making”(Ibid, p. 201). And, as she stresses, “By definition direct democracy cannot occur by fiat: it takes time for groups to figure out effectively how to honour dissent without letting it prevent a decision, how to listen to each other and build a consensus, and how to demonstrate respect, yet these are necessary for trust and effective decision making”(Ibid, p. 211).

Brown expands on this link between how to honour dissent—or the articulation and reconciliation of dissent among and between workers who are equals--and democratic decision-making as it arises from the collective deliberations of workers who are equals. Brown’s study (1992), heavily influenced by Rothschild’s earlier work (Rothschild-Whitt, 1978), moves beyond the list making of Raimbeau and Rothschild of the key elements of the non-hierarchical workplace, to an analysis of the core organizing processes, what she quotes as ““working out what is going on and why, what to do about it, and the translation of these understandings into action”” [Hosking, 1988, cited in Brown, 1992, p. 30]. Her focus on core organizing processes is ultimately a focus on how, and by extension, on whom, or on the “interaction patterns through which social organization is created and maintained which promotes collectivity rather than hierarchy”(Brown, 1992, p. 62) among and between those working together. These ‘interaction patterns’, or skills of organizing or ways of working together must, she emphasizes, be taught, learned and shared in a on-going process of contiguous organizing among and between equals if the non-hierarchical, fully participatory workplace is to be created through collective decision-making.

It’s what James Suroweicki (2004), in a major study on decision-making, has called ‘the wisdom of crowds’. Suroweicki argues that despite a popular cultural belief that only a few at the top are intelligent enough to make decisions, in reality the best and most thorough decisions are made by a properly informed, diverse, and independent crowd or group of people, which includes by definition

both the smart and the stupid. The collective wisdom of a crowd, he maintains, is actually smarter than that of a few experts, pointing out “how little evidence there is that individuals can consistently make superior forecasts or strategic decisions in the face of genuine uncertainty”(p. 217), and “the more power you give a single individuals in the face of complexity and uncertainty, the more likely it is that bad decisions will get made”(p. 220). In organizational terms, the cult of the manager, the corporate saviour with its religious overtones, and their deep hostility to opposition by subordinates (p. 208), prevents rather than fosters good decisions: they simply don’t have enough information, and they can’t get it, given the circumstances of their position. In his view the more hierarchical the decision making process, the less anyone was presented with views that disagreed with his or her own. Like Brown and Rothschild, he argues that the decisions which result from non-hierarchical decision making are better and more knowledgeable than the decisions which arise from a decision-making process based on the semi-religious belief in the efficacy of the top down leader/expert. Furthermore, the effects of command and control are far-reaching: it takes too much time and energy, saps motivation and initiative (*Ibid*, p. 204), and produces a lack of accountability and responsibility. The necessary conditions for better decisions is instead a “wider distribution of real decision making power” (*Ibid*, p. 203). It is not the isolated manager, but ”people with local knowledge [who] are often positioned to come up with a workable and efficient solution. The virtues of specialization and local knowledge often outweigh managerial expertise in decision making”(*Ibid*, 212). In other words, decisions are best made by the group, collectively, as Brown and Rothschild argue, not those powerful few at the top, isolated, alone, and hostile to any form of opposition.

What Rothschild mentions only briefly, that all workers must be taught the skills of organizing necessary for the establishment of a democratic workplace, Brown examines carefully. She stresses throughout her study that all these skills must be taught, learned and shared, and that no one organizing skill—like the skill of leading, for example--be linked permanently to either a position or a person. All these skills of organizing: learning how to make collective decisions, learning how to articulate and reconcile dissent, learning how to build consensus, responsibility and accountability into the processes of working together, learning how to think strategically and politically, learning how to lead, must be taught to others, learned by all, and then shared by all with each other in order to create a non-hierarchical egalitarian workplace. These are organizing processes that I have analysed elsewhere as shared decision making about what is actually going on, what to do about it and how: planning the strategy and the creation of shared scenarios, the on-going necessity for consensus building and responsibility building, the articulation and reconciliation of dissent, and preparing for the results within a flexible social order where no one person leads or coordinates permanently (Oseen, 2005; cf. Barnsley and Lewis, 1992). This focus on the processes of organizing or interaction patterns is key. As Rowe (1995) indicated in her study of micro-inequities and the workplace, it is in the ways we relate to each other when we work together that reveal our egalitarian, contiguous commitments (cf. Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000<sup>xvi</sup>). It’s in who speaks, how that speaker is greeted, paid attention to, how each speaker contributes--or is ignored--that reveals whether these processes of non-hierarchical organizing really embody the contiguity of ‘more than workers less than bosses’ which the workers seek in the construction of the egalitarian workplace.

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? How do they deal with power in their organizing processes, in the “micro-inequities” (Rowe, 1995), 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<sup>xvii</sup>? 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?

### **“I learned to lower my head”; “The men tremble when we walk in as a gang”: The general assemblies, majority rules, conflict and decision making**

Rothschild’s analysis of the necessary components to non-hierarchical organizing was 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, and 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 worker explained to me how the general assembly worked, telling me that “the council: the president, vice-president, treasurer, trustee [a government appointee who is without a vote] decides what is important. They are all voted into their positions”. The general assemblies met less often, the elected coordinators more often”. 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 workers 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”. When I asked what the assembly decides--everything?, they answered 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”.

### **Budgeting and Money**

This egalitarian way of deciding everything by majority rule in the general assembly extended to the necessity for transparent budgeting—the workers had to know everything about the money if they were to make the best decisions. One funder who provided capital to the cooperatives pointed out to me that the best guarantee of using the money correctly and honestly was transparency, because that ensured that the workers agreed in the general assembly on what to spend and how to spend it. Transparency of accounting loomed large to outside funders: this same funder told me, “Now we look at how democratic the cooperatives we support are because a top down organization is easily arbitrary with the funds. If it’s not participatory, if the workers don’t know about it, then they say ‘why should I work to pay this off?’” He went on to stress that “the more openness the assembly

created, the less mistrust in the coop”, and told me that “as soon as the people in the administration start to shut out the others regarding the dollars the rest of the people start to say, ‘How can we work so hard, and get so little?’ Things like rotation of responsibility, openness regarding the numbers, keeps a coop harmonious”<sup>xviii</sup>.

When I asked the workers how they maintained harmony in the general assembly among the workers and how they dealt with conflict, which I have analysed elsewhere as the processes of articulation and reconciliation of dissent (Oseen, 2005), the workers told me they focused on the role of the ‘one who knows’, common sense, ‘bowing one’s head’ to the will of the majority. These were all ways of dealing with conflict embedded in how the cooperatives decided to get work done<sup>xix</sup>. For a worker cooperative, that meant figuring out ways to solve conflict in non-hierarchical, egalitarian ways, ways, however, which were not always the same for women and men, since none of these processes of organizing were experienced by women or men as exactly the same. When I asked about how this resolution of conflict works, one worker replied that: “The assembly is complicated. Here a companion doesn’t agree, we try to always respect the one who knows”. Another worker from another coop pointed out that:

When these things come to light, we have to appeal to common sense. Each companion has to realize that this conflict has to end. It’s good to argue, but then there has to be a resolution. Hand out cards and go on with the next issue. The trustee [a government appointee] acts as a mediator—the trustee is part of the administrative council. The trustee has the obligation to keep track of everything. The trustee has to write in a minute book all the resolutions debated, and passed or not. If there’s anything weird an associate sees in terms of pesos, there’s a law for coops that allows for legal intervention. It’s a government institution, we don’t want to get them involved. We don’t want the government involved. They [the trustee] are useless and maybe on the side of the owner.

The worker emphasized that the workers in the assembly had to figure out what to do without the trustee, who could just cause more trouble; there was an incentive for the workers to call the question, vote, and then accept the will of the majority. And he emphasized that it was crucial that the workers deal with the conflicts within the organization themselves without outside influence: “From the doors in the conflicts must be managed by the workers themselves....the left helps, but it still should stay out of worker conflict. Conflicts are best dealt with in the assemblies”. Another worker described budgeting and the inevitable conflicts over money like this: stating that having clear goals and using the kind of common sense which comes from living as a family to solve problems. To him, it’s about

having a clear goal, and recognizing in the place of the owner [we] will be responsible. We agree because we have the same goal, and the majority is developed through talking and common sense. For example, the assembly [16 people] listened to the report of the subsidiary. We decided what to buy logically. Those who used the machine decided what to buy. ‘We’re not going to send out the president’. We laugh a lot. It’s so different than what was before that you can’t make a comparison. We have a assembly for a big decision. We decide on where to spend the money like in a home. We get help from the university, from the technical University of Buenos Aires engineers, and the faculty of philosophy and letters which helps them connect with what they need. They’re very good at getting everything possible from the money.

He went on to point out that budgeting is “Common sense: we manage like in a home; it’s not that difficult”, a similar analysis from a woman in another coop who told me about budgeting that “It’s adding and subtracting”. He went on to state that “we take short steps, if we take longer steps we might fall, so we don’t want to be in debt. If you don’t want to create unemployment you have to create jobs here. If you keep with common sense you might not be able to make huge leaps, [but] you can sustain yourselves”.

### **Salaries Versus Re-investment**

There was a lot of discussion about the importance of equal salaries, to reflect the equal dignity of all work and how conflict was resolved between paying themselves, and reinvestment. The workers linked equal salaries to dignity; they had been paid so little for so long by the owners that to pay everyone the same was a way not only of creating solidarity among themselves, but rethinking how work was valued. It often seemed to me that this was a way of stating to the ex-owners, the ex-bosses, that they had been wrong in how they had valued work; that all work was in itself, a dignified act that was worthy of equal pay. One worker, the son of one of the original workers, told me that all workers, paid a lot or very little, were in same boat when the factory closed. All were equally harmed, so by extension all were worthy of equal pay: “Whoever earned greater or lesser was going to be left on the street”—it didn’t matter, all were harmed by the closing of the factory, despite how much or how little they earned. He also told me that during the Argentinian economic collapse, peoples’ wages dropped so dramatically even when they were working that “When I was working, and I had to pay for [his mother’s] bus tickets, she was paid two pesos [in the factory], and a bus ticket was five pesos: It’s undignified to have to pay for work”. Now, he told me, things had changed: “Here in the coop you get the same salary no matter what you learn [he was in cutting, which he was proud of, a skill he had been given the opportunity to learn by the others in the coop]. For me, dividing the salaries keeps people in different categories. The administrative world got more and the factory workers didn’t get anything. I lived all of this through my mother, so I know”.

One worker told me that one of the most difficult areas to resolve was how to decide on the split between the needs of the workers and the needs of the workplace: “The most important things are discussed first; if it’s a lot of money we take it to the council [more than 1000 pesos, or more than a month’s wages for someone] the assembly votes on it. For example, when we had the floors, the pipes since 1978, [the question was to] invest or take the money home? There was a group who didn’t agree, but the majority decides. 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”. A group of women workers at one of the coops put it this way when I asked about money: “We have associate meetings with majority vote, with different types of jobs. We’re all associates, we’re all paid the same. We’re investing a lot, we try to take home what’s left. It’s more or less fixed every week. If we take home everything there’s nothing left to grow”. One worker at another coop stressed to me that disputes over salaries and reinvestment are the most common area of conflict. When I asked why, he told me that it always surfaces like that: “Do we spend it on this, and not on us? We get three hundred pesos a week; it depends on [how much we produce]. But if we only pay one hundred a week, then the fights start”. [To put that in the broader context of the cost of living, eight hundred pesos was the

basic monthly wage at the coops I visited, but my translator told me that the workers really need 1600 pesos a month to live decently].

## **Coordinators**

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, workers explained it to me like this: “The workers know when it begins and ends. Those who knew, not because they are able, but they knew more, 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 they had to deal with, and when I asked how they dealt with this, they used a family metaphor, something that they could all understand, but which parenthetically had different implications for women than for men: “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”. Once again they used the metaphor of the family—the workplace was often compared to a family, so it was interesting to hear then how the patriarchal family was interpreted and in what context. Another worker told me that coordinator meetings were held “more or less once a week. If it’s not so busy, once a week, and more busy, not so often. The agenda is set. We decide what we’re going to talk about, and we decide what’s most important; because “the rope is [on] the neck”, which I took to mean that they couldn’t procrastinate in these meetings, and that decisions had to be made if their coop was going to succeed.

## **Task Rotation**

The election of non-permanent or rotating coordinators in order to coordinate the work was similar to how they understood how work needed to get done. Instead of a standard interpretation of worker flexibility, which meant in a top down hierarchical organization that the owner did not have to pay for skills, what the workers interpreted flexibility to mean was related to worker control over the pace of the workplace, that stepping in to get something done was for the betterment of all, as in a family. As one worker told me: We are working without “any boss, any owner. That we’re working without bosses, relaxed, anarchically....All of us know the orders. We’re organized anarchists”. When I asked how do you know the rules, the orders?, he replied, “We’re all watching over what needs to be done [like in a home]. If you love your son, you’re going to change diapers”. Another worker pointed out the advantages of stepping in when a job needed to be done: “When the owners were here, I ironed pant waists and some others ironed the pant legs. I would sit and wait.

Instead now I iron whatever needs to be done, the same thing with the sewing machine. It means to cooperate. Worker control means you see whatever needs to be done and do it. Every associate has to do three or four operations for the production to advance. If I iron waists, and there's no more, I iron coats, et cetera. If I've got work done at my place, I come here”.

The opportunity to work in different areas in order that the workplace as a whole benefits is also linked to opportunities to learn how to do different work, which in turn benefits all. One worker explained to me that “The order comes in, the sales companion has the customer orders. I prepare the sizes, and I make the drawings with the plotter. I was taught all of this at work in a year and now I ‘m making models. In the old [place of business, before the worker coop] workers only knew one thing, in this new [worker coop] we teach more things. So it’s more professional. And the garments are better and I’ve had the opportunity and I’m asking and demanding to know more and I’ve had job offers to leave”[as he became more skilled, but he didn’t—he stayed with the factory].

### **Task Rotation and women**

The women who talked to me about task rotation approached it differently than the men, in two ways. They talked about how necessary it was for them to learn how to do different things, in order not to be ghettoized, and they talked about how necessary it was for them to be able to decide themselves who did what at work, in order that they retain maximum flexibility. That led into a long discussion on the role of coordinator. They stated that it was they who really decided how and when to do the work, so they had the necessary flexibility in order to cover for each other. They also told me how important it was that they not be ghettoized, so that they occupied only a few jobs in the factory. They were very aware of how important it was that they were not marginalized, and that depended on learning jobs outside of their own particular department at work. The women emphasized the necessity of learning how to do different jobs in the male dominated environment of one particular factory, and how they felt that if they didn’t have these opportunities, if they didn’t fight for them, they would lose whatever advantages they had of working with the men in a cooperative. They were quite aware that this was a fight over maintaining egalitarian relations between the women and the men, and that if they did not win these fights, they would be slowly consigned to the margins. Unlike in the other coops where women were much better represented, they were much more aware of the marginalizing processes, and how these were linked to opportunities to do particular kinds of work. As they pointed out to me, the need to learn other jobs was linked to minimizing ghettoization, just as it was linked to controlling the pace of their workplace so they could attend to their other responsibilities that might crop up.

Both Raimbeau and Rothschild stressed that to prevent female ghettoization in worker coops task rotation and mixed teams are important. To Rothschild, “To the extent that the teams will bring an opportunity for skills development, advancement, and democratic voice within the organization, women and minorities will miss an experience of value if they are left off the team....teams themselves [are] a way for women and minorities to gain job-related skills, positional advancement, and job integration”(2000, p. 204). However, she goes on to point out that what makes it difficult is men’s reluctance to work with women: “although the women were generally eager to learn the skills involved in the predominantly male jobs on the team, the men generally resisted the idea of learning or enacting the lower status traditionally female jobs”(Ibid). It was a finding echoed by Elisabeth Sundin (2000) in her study of how men redefined what was skill in order to maintain their dominant

position, and downgraded women's increased technical knowledge, a finding played out in other studies of women's labour market ghettoization (cf. Armstrong & Armstrong, 1993), and men's reluctance to work with women. Women don't enter into previously male dominated work through an open front door: it's that men have already left out the back.

They described to me how the subtle process of ghettoization worked, and how they resisted. They told me that they "wanted to be together. There's no work for people our age and we wanted to be together. We were happy to meet together, after four months in the tent. Of all the people, the majority who abandoned [the tent] were heads of families". The women who told me that were single mothers, but they never called themselves heads of families: the men were heads of families, not them. Although the women were still responsible for their kids, and in some cases their parents, they still never referred to themselves as heads, which seemed to indicate a different way of seeing the world. They went on to stress to me that although many of the men left, "we had faith, we believed, and we survived, by working at other jobs. We persevered, we were constant, we cleaned up, cleaning bricks, you couldn't tell who were men and women, we were all the same, we looked like ants". So there they were, like ants together, but they pointed out to me that the solidarity between the women and men didn't last, the separation into women's work and men's work began after the cleaning of the factory was completed: "Then when there were ovens. That's when the separation started, the initial oven which made the ashtrays". I asked them how they were resisting this ghettoization into women's jobs and men's jobs, and they told me that they were trying by taking courses:

We can't be engineers, but yesterday we started to learn to do other things. Before we had to be in places where we were needed. If you have to export, we have to put in trained people. But now, we started a course. Once a week, two hours, they're training us, we're always asking for training. In coops they have to train their associates, it's lawful, required to learn. It's within the statute of the coops, but the salesman is teaching us marketing. There's also a psychologist. The person who gives the course is also advised. There's a fire course, first aid. The course was offered partially, because of the article [in the bylaws of the coop], because of time. We can go to every course. The courses were taught so we understand things better. It helps. We want to work in all parts [of the factory], it's very limited where we can work: for example, coordinating quality control, ordering, maybe not the physical jobs. They don't want us to do heavier work. There are men which support us because they've seen what we can do. Coordinating to check for supplies, write the report, make decisions about machines. It's lighter but you still [have to work quite hard].

They went on to stress to me, as many coop members did, that everyone was equal, so it's not about money: "We are all taking home the same amount. It's more about improving ourselves, not so much to work everywhere". They didn't want to be prevented from learning how to work in other areas; they knew that if they were not to be confined to an area where only women worked, they had to learn all kinds of other jobs, that making the same amount of money as their male counterparts was not enough to guarantee equality on the floor.

## **Women and Duties of Coordinator**

They went on to tell me that not only did they want to ensure that they were not ghettoized, they also had a different approach to the duties of the coordinator. There aren't very many women in this male dominated coop. 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. When I asked how they came together to get work done, they told me that : "At 5:40 am we all come to relieve the others [for the six am-to two pm shift]". When I asked how they organized among themselves, and asked what the coordinator did, they told me that the coordinator "knows the orders and priorities with the warehouse, the warehouse coordinator tells the needs of packaging". When I asked how they decided how to organize their work, they didn't speak of any involvement by the coordinator. Instead the coordinator fulfilled the role of information transmitter between the various departments. For themselves, within their department, they decided what to do and how to do it, telling me that: "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". What made this interesting is that they 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. They kept the coordinator only because he needed the job, and they didn't want to hurt his feelings. They kept him on because he was old, 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:

The first response is the coordinator. We don't have a female coordinator but we don't need either a male or a female coordinator. Among the four of 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. If any supplies are needed, he still does a lot of stuff, it's all right, that there's a coordinator. They want to work in all areas that doesn't demand strength.

But they were quite adamant to me that a coordinator, another layer in the hierarchy, was something they didn't need, in the same way they didn't need husbands. Just as the workers in general would use the metaphor of the family in order to elaborate a point, which always seemed to me to be about ensuring that everyone understand what was being said, since everyone was part of a family, when the women referred to the family they were using it to make a point, but not one that had been brought up before. 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 on their own, but with responsibilities to children and parents—they couldn't see why they needed a coordinator. 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 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, and that included each other.

One woman 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. There are so many mother/daughters here and father/sons the coop decided to have that. When we started the coop there were missing people, so we brought in our family members, to avoid conflicts legal problems, we will leave it to our children. There are people who are not a family, but we try to have people who are relatives. I think it has worked well.

## Evaluation Strategies

When I asked the workers in all the coops about how workers were evaluated, and how much work is expected from each worker, they pointed at the general assemblies, where they didn't shy away from tough decisions about how to deal with workers who weren't working hard enough, and who might therefore jeopardize the success of the cooperative. One worker told me that: "These arguments about working are settled in the assembly. They might be sanctioned. We give new people time to learn, but they must work". When I asked how that process worked, a man from one of the coops told me that "If they don't work, they're sanctioned orally, or they stay home". His female colleague pointed out how necessary it was to deal immediately with any slacking, stating that: "We know from many years of working here, that as soon as it starts, we point it out". Another woman worker stated to me that "It's not that we're owners, but we workers are managing a factory". A male colleague stressed that they had to do this; that they couldn't let things slide, because the workers are inseparable from the workplace. There is no distinction between the two, as he observed: "We workers are able to carry forward a factory. It's our garments, our labour, which is exhibited in the shops". This focus on the success of the coop reappeared in the discussion about absences: the coordinators, who are responsible, can fine errant workers "first 10%, then 20%" because "the production is harmed". Errant workers can't be allowed to harm others, the others who make up the coop; ultimately, the focus is always on 'ours'.

## Women on evaluation:

The workers I spoke to also weave the ongoing necessity for teaching skills into a distinction made between evaluation, sanctioning, and teaching, all linked to teaching and creating an inclusive workplace, where everyone knows what to do and how to do it, based on rituals of belonging like drinking mate together. One woman explained to me that this process of teaching and sanctioning worked like this: “We’re also learning every day, the people who are new are continually preached to. We are not under an owner, but we have to demonstrate this. The new kids don’t understand. At my sector, we are constantly teaching how to do things properly. If you want to drink mate [a metaphor for inclusion], and if you clean well, I’ll know because I’ve done it too. They’re not punished, but they are sanctioned”. One group of women workers told me that the process of evaluation for them worked collectively, although it was complicated because so many of the newcomers were relatives of those already working there. They told me that: “The other girls are too new, in the future they will be associates. It’s a minimum of three to six months. We evaluate, then, if they are good companions, [if they have ]good behaviour [they become permanent]”. When I asked who makes the decisions about who will become permanent, they stressed to me that “the coordinator and companion observe. All the associates decide after the coordinator makes a report. We accept almost everyone because they adapt. It’s difficult sometimes because they’re the children of associates. You don’t want to cause trouble. Obviously, they always teach them; there’s lots of opportunities to fit in”. 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.

### **Struggling with patriarchy: The women**

Not only did the women talk about coordination, opportunities for training, and evaluation in different terms than the men; the women from the coops also talked about conflict differently. Compared to the men, their analysis of conflict was both much tied to the egalitarian structure of the coops and 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 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 that 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.

### **Conclusion: The metaphor of the family and what it means to challenge 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. Instead of using the head of the household, which they reserved for men, as single parents they never used that term to describe themselves. Instead, they talked about their responsibilities 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. They never used the term head of the household to apply to themselves; that they reserved for married men. Although they talked about their responsibilities as more onerous than those facing married

men [they said they worked 20 hours a day in order to meet all their responsibilities], they did not use a hierarchical term to designate their place. Instead, 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**

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, 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 honourary 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 honourary 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 which would capture their egalitarian, contiguous way of working, still awaits us. Democracy in the workplace which 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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## Interviews

Print Shop interview, April 27<sup>th</sup> 2006

Glass factory Interview, May 4, 2006

Balloon Factory interview, May 3, 2006

Hotel Interview, May 5, 2006

Clothing Factory Interview, May 3,

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<sup>i</sup> Irigaray makes very clear that sexual difference is a symbolic--not a biological—category. See *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) for Irigaray's full explication.

<sup>ii</sup> In this ostensibly sexual neutral symbolic structure, women are just like men, only the opposite or reverse image. 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: In the famous words of Sky Masterson in 'Guys and Dolls', all dolls are the same, says Masterson whose name itself exemplifies Irigaray's analysis. Irigaray argues 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 be able to be recognized. And only then, by creating a place for the female subject who does not extrapolate from the male subject what justice is, for example, will we be able to create a space for determining justice among and between women who are different from each other, will we be able to solve conflict among and between

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women, will we be able to create a ‘utopian horizon’ which we struggle towards, acting on a world which we define as female subjects.

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 *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) in particular.

<sup>iii</sup> To organize contiguously means to organize in side by side ways, or non-hierarchically as opposed to hierarchically.

<sup>iv</sup> At the turn of the last century, Argentina was richer than Canada. Martin, J. [1999-2000] The Bottom Line at Century End. *The Beaver*, 79.6, 6-7. 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. [Emerging Market Indicators, *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”[R.K. Schaeffer, 2003, p. 854-856]

<sup>v</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>vi</sup> This focus on the cogito of sexual difference, or the way of looking at the world, means that there will be two subjects where now there is only the [unacknowledged] male subject who stands in for both the male subject and the possible female subject. There would be two ways of thinking about the world, two ways of thinking about justice whereas now there is only one, based on the unacknowledged male subject’s understanding of what justice could be. See Irigaray’s (1994) *Thinking the difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*, especially Chapter 3, Civil Rights and Responsibilities for the Two Sexes.

<sup>vii</sup> 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].

<sup>viii</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”(Trigona, 2006). This process was called ‘recovering’ the factories.

<sup>ix</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.

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<sup>xi</sup> Morgan, 2006, is one of many organizational theorists who have critiqued hierarchy for its necessary emphasis on control. See his bibliography, pages....

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<sup>xii</sup>, Decisions without Hierarchy by Iannello, 1993; Planning Development with Women by Young, 1993; and The Myth of Community by Gujiit & Shah, 1998 all have analyses of how to work together in non-hierarchical ways, although none of them are specifically focused on non-hierarchical organizing processes. Strategies for Change, by Lewis and Barnsley, 1992, unfortunately now out of print, is an excellent workbook on exactly how a group can come together to make decisions about what to do, how to do it, and how to evaluate what has been done, in inclusive, participatory, non-hierarchical ways.

<sup>xiii</sup> To Rothschild, workers “should be involved in all of the decisions that significantly affect their work experience—decisions about appropriate pay differentials, the pace of work, the allocation of tasks, and the appointment or election of leaders or managers”(p. 208). “‘Demystifying’ the organization’s base of knowledge—to sharing the knowledge—was essential to the sharing of different job tasks and to effective democratic oversight of the whole operation”(p. 208), which included all aspects of the budgeting of resources, “the pay levels of others, costs, and earnings”(p. 208). Like Rothschild, James Suroweicki in *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004) argues that despite a popular cultural belief that only a few at the top are intelligent enough to make decisions, in reality the best and most thorough decisions are made by a properly informed and engaged crowd or group of people, which includes by definition both the smart and the stupid. The collective wisdom of a crowd, contrary to popular belief, is actually smarter than that of a few experts.

<sup>xiv</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>xv</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 Suroweicki, 2004, p. 210).

<sup>xvi</sup> Meyerson and Fletcher’s (2000) paper deals with the kinds of questions organizations need to ask in order to get at those hidden or covert processes which marginalize women, focusing on who participates in terms of interactions, what work is valued, how individuals are evaluated, using what criteria. See in particular page 132.

<sup>xvii</sup> According to the French philosopher Luce Irigaray, our present day symbolic structures, or the philosophies, myths, religions, stories and words we use to make sense of our world, are both dualistic and hierarchical, where what is ‘good’ [or any other term, like mind, male, leader] is defined by what is ‘not good’ [or body, woman, subordinate], and what is ‘not good’ is lesser. are structured into our symbolic structures, and a defining aspect of those relations of domination and subordination is that women are always linked to the subordinate term, where as female to male, body to the mind, subordinate to leader or the dominant. These relations of domination and subordination, although hidden, circulate in our symbolic structures, working always to reconstitute the different from the same as lesser. Irigaray’s further point is that this relationship is

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obscured, so that instead what we confront is the rhetoric of the neutral, the sexually indifferent individual, when in reality women are subordinated to men in the guise of the masculine neutral. that women are consigned to the position of the different from the same and therefore the lesser of the same?

<sup>xviii</sup> That's an entirely different approach than the usual one analysed by Newman in 1980 where outside funders demanded a treasurer along with a traditional organizational hierarchy, thinking that would ensure that the money would be well spent. Instead as the funder pointed out, flattened, open and transparent was the best to ensure that the organization survived. The hierarchical requirements of the outside funders which Newman pointed out twenty-five years ago actually led to the organization's demise. Only those organizations which had no requirement for hierarchical organizing survived.

<sup>xix</sup> Or as Burawoy points out, "conflict and consent are not primordial conditions but products of the particular organization of work"(1979, p. 12).