

Workers' Self-Management in Argentina

Contesting Neo-Liberalism by Occupying Companies, Creating Cooperatives, and Recuperating Autogestión (Brill/Haymarket, 2020)

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Author

Dr. Marcelo Vieta

Assistant Professor

Ontario Institute for Studies in

Education of the University of Toronto

www.vieta.ca

marcelo.vieta@utoronto.ca

Endorsements for Book



“There is virtually nothing like this book when it comes to the study of lived practices of workers’ control today. Everyone searching for alternatives to neoliberalism and the domination of labor will relish this powerful and important work.”

~ **David McNally** is Cullen Distinguished Professor of History and Business, University of Houston. He is the author of *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism, and the Marxist Critique* (Verso, 1992) and *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (PM Press, 2010).

“This book is a tremendous gift. A must read for scholars, activists and all who want to learn how to retake our lives and create something new. Within these pages Vieta has detailed the history of class struggle in Argentina, bringing us to this historical moment, grounded in a new conceptualization of *autogestión*. Workers taking back – recuperating – their sense of worth and dignity through directly democratic workplace recuperations... Vieta shows, by way of extended examples, that people can self-organize their work and life, in ways that are horizontal, effective and affective.”

~ **Marina Sitrin** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton. She is the author of *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina* (Zed Books, 2012) and *They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy*, co-authored with Dario Azzellini (Verso Press, 2014).

“Marcelo Vieta's *Workers' Self-Management in Argentina* is one of the most important books on contemporary labour and democracy... The volume masterfully revisits and extends theory on *autogestión* (... self-management in English) and places it in richly detailed historical, economic, and social contexts.”

~ **George Cheney** is Professor of Communication, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. He is the author of *Values at Work: Employee Participation Meets Market Pressure at Mondragon* (Cornell University Press, 2002) and co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization* (Routledge, 2014).

“From this study Marcelo Vieta draws important conclusions about the circumstances in which the potential for self-directed worker activities is actualized in ways that point beyond the existing system of production relations... [I am] impressed by this work. It is a major contribution to scholarship on the global worker of the twenty-first century.”

~ **Nick Dyer-Witheford** is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at University of Western Ontario. He is the author of *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism* (University of Illinois, 1999) and *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (Pluto Press, 2015).

“Marcelo Vieta's book ranges far beyond the bounds of its Argentine analysis... Vieta provides a powerful and meaningful critique and alternative to neo-liberal capitalism.”

~ **Peter Ranis** is Professor Emeritus in Political Science, Graduate Center, City University of New York. He is the author of *Cooperatives Confronting Capitalism: Challenging the Neo-liberal Economy* (Zed Books, 2016) and *Argentine Workers: Peronism and Contemporary Class Consciousness* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

Book Summary

Workers' Self-Management in Argentina: Contesting Neo-liberalism by Occupying Companies, Creating Cooperatives, and Recuperating Autogestión homes in on the emergence and consolidation of Argentina's *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (ERTs, worker-recuperated enterprises), a workers' occupy, recuperation, and self-management movement that surged at the turn of the millennium in the thick of the country's neo-liberal crisis. Since then, around 400 companies across most urban economic sectors have been taken over and converted to cooperatives by almost 16,000 workers. Grounded in class-struggle Marxism, political economy, labour process theory, and a critical sociology of work, the book situates the ERT movement in Argentina's long tradition of working-class activism, the broader history of workers' responses to capitalist crisis, and the wave of anti-systemic movements against neo-liberal capitalism that took hold throughout the country in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Beginning with the voices of the ERT movement's protagonists, the book goes on to trace out the movement's history, organizational dynamics, challenges, and radical social innovations. *Workers' Self-Management in Argentina* ultimately develops a social theory of *autogestión*—a politically prefigurative and ethically infused notion of workers' self-management and workers' control that unleashes radical social change for work organizations, surrounding communities, and beyond.

Argentina's ERTs began to emerge as workers' bottom-up responses to the collapse of the country's neo-liberal model during the years spanning the turn of the millennium. As business bankruptcies and unemployment rates soared to unprecedented levels during these years, more and more workers in a broad cross-section of Argentina's urban-based economy began to takeover and self-manage the capitalist workplaces in crisis that had formerly employed them, reconstituting them as worker cooperatives. And they continue to emerge in response to a new wave of anti-labour legislation, business closures, unemployment and precarity, and myriad other socio-economic challenges unleashed by the administration of President Mauricio Macri in 2016 (Ruggeri, 2016; Ruggeri & Vieta, 2015; Vieta, 2019). As a rejoinder to these challenges, ERTs have been practicing a form of *autogestión* that both contests the neo-liberal enclosures of life while prefiguring other, more directly-democratic and less exploitative economic arrangements grounded in redesigned labour processes and community-centred development. Argentina's ERTs have thus proven to be viable alternatives by workers themselves to macro- and micro-economic crises, anti-labour policies, and the worst effects of the neo-liberal model on working people, inspiring other workers' self-management projects in other parts of the world (Atzeni & Vieta, 2014; Vieta, Depedri, & Carrano, 2017; Vieta, 2019).

Why did ERTs emerge when they did? What are their connections to historical workers' struggles in Argentina and elsewhere? What exactly are ERT protagonists "recuperating" when they take over businesses in trouble and self-manage them? How do their lived experiences of crises and practices of *autogestión* help contribute to our understanding of work beyond capital? What is at stake for these workers in the practices of "occupy, resist, produce," the slogan that evocatively captures their paths to *autogestión*? What can workers' struggles throughout the world today, in our current iteration of neo-liberal capitalism and its perpetual cycles of crises, learn from Argentina's ERTs? These are the guiding questions that drive the book.

To answer these questions, *Workers' Self-Management in Argentina* brings together the research that author Marcelo Vieta has been conducting since 2005 with Argentina's ERT movement (Vieta, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2019), now updated and expanded in this book published in Brill's "Historical Materialism" book series (Vieta, 2020). It consolidates this research by focusing in on: (1) the political economic conditions and historical labour struggles out of which ERTs emerge; (2) their worker-protagonists' struggles to re-

appropriate once privately owned capitalist firms, reconstruct them as worker cooperatives, and thereby democratize the labour process; and (3) how ERT workers transform themselves (from managed employees to self-managed workers), their workplaces (from hierarchical organizations to democratically run worker cooperatives), and communities (from depleted neighbourhoods to self-provisioning localities).

The book's research method is interdisciplinary in scope, deploying two complementary approaches: a "political economy of the working class" stream rooted in class-struggle Marxist theory (Lebowitz, 2003; Marx, 1864/1978; McNally, 1993), and an extended case study stream grounded in a critical sociology of work (Burawoy, 1998). A *macro-level historical and political economic* dimension relies on mostly Argentine secondary documents gathered from scholarly, government, union, journalistic, and social movement sources in order to outline the history and conjunctural realities underpinning the emergence and consolidation of Argentina's ERTs. At a *micro-sociological level*, the book takes inspiration from the semi-structured interview approach of Latin American and Argentine oral labour history. Here, Vieta engages in extensive ethnographic observations in three illustrative ERT case studies and further observations in numerous other ERTs, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 60 ERT protagonists and Argentine labour leaders and policy makers. Further guiding the empirical analysis are the conceptual tools offered by labour process and moral economy theory (Atzeni, 2010; Burawoy, 1985; Marx, 1867/1967; Thompson, 1971/1993) and social movement learning approaches (Foley, 1999; Hall & Clover, 2005; Livingstone & Roth, 2001; Overwein, 2000; Schugurensky, 2000). Interviews with ERT worker protagonists also include a series of embedded learning indicators that specifically gauge for changes in worker-members' subjectivities from having participated in workplace takeovers and the subsequent dynamics of self-managed labour processes that emerge in their new worker cooperatives. This allows the book's empirical findings to detail how ERT workers: (1) acquire new job skills, learn new cooperative and collective values and practices, and personally and collectively transform from being involved in the ERT; (2) democratize the labour process of once-capitalist firms; (3) incorporate egalitarian pay schemes and job sharing strategies; (4) mobilize collectively to influence the reform of Argentina's bankruptcy, cooperative, and labour laws to favour workers recuperating and converting workplaces to cooperatives; and (5) recuperate the social production of wealth by opening up shops to the community and outwardly engaging in the social and economic development of surrounding communities from below.

Via the praxical framework of ERT workers-protagonists' *radical social innovations* and a new theory of the multi-dimensional recuperation of their own creatively productive *living labour*, the book ultimately concludes that Argentina's ERTs are promising and prefigurative alternative work organizations that sketch out how new worker subjectivities, workplaces, and community-centred economies can be created, in part, from out the shell of former capitalist workplaces. ERTs, in short, delineate suggestive proposals for how workers themselves—via their very living labour—*can* and *do* reconceptualize new forms of work organizations and community-focused social relations of production rooted in solidarity, collaborative information and resource exchange, and mutual aid, rather than in individualism, commodification, and competition.

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