

“Granny Used to Sing Bandiera Rossa and the Internationale, and Went to Mass Every Day.” Politics and Culture in Argentina

Mariana Mastrángelo, Universidad de Buenos Aires, translated by author

This paper explores how people remember images and memories of their hometowns. Contrasting different testimonies, ideas arise about the definition of work, morality, life experiences, and languages of class that define a specific culture. We can explain this culture as a radical or labour culture that exists outside of the main urban centres in Argentina. The use of Oral History helps us discover a rich world unknown to us. Analysing a series of interviews with workers, intellectuals, and political militants, we can reconstruct a rich world of experiences and life ways of the Argentine work class.

What does a Salta female worker have in common with a male laborer from Córdoba Province beyond the fact that both are Argentine? How do we approach this incredibly diverse universe full of political, cultural, social, and economic differences? Perhaps a way to begin this approach is what some authors term a “conjectural paradigm.”¹ This involves the creation of an interpretative method, where apparently marginal details are the essential forms of access to a determined reality, composed of signs, clues, or traces, where all are related to the “tracks.”² Occasionally, a labor meeting, a strike, or another kind of mobilization brings out facts that would normally remain hidden and that, because of these actions, are brought into the light. The analysis of the Argentine working class in the Argentine provinces is a huge universe since it encompasses widely different complexities arising from specific historical processes. At the same time, each historical process gives us a series of clues to feelings and the “common sense” of workers in towns and small cities that contribute to our understanding of what might be called a “class phenomenon.”

These clues can be found in worker testimonies, interviews, and memoirs. It is in their forms of expression, in their choice of language, and in the images workers use that we can find their interpretation of their material reality and life experiences. At the same time, these expressions take an inherently political (or class) connotation by defining “friends” and “enemies,” “correct” and “incorrect” behavior. Oral History contributes significantly

¹ For instance, Carlo Guinzburg, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: clues and scientific method,” *History Workshop Journal*, nr. 9 (1980): 7-36; *El hilo y las huellas. Lo verdadero, lo falso, lo ficticio* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, 2010), 9-19; Sidney Chalhouh, *Visões da liberdade...* 6th ed. (Sao Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2009), 13-28. E. P. Thompson, *Agenda para una historia radical* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2000), 22-26.

² Carlo Guinzburg *El hilo y las huellas. Lo verdadero, lo falso, lo ficticio, Op. Cit.*, 9.

towards accessing the meanings in language and suggesting clues evidencing social phenomena. This piece will discuss the testimonies of several workers, male and female, from small towns in Córdoba province, Argentina. The subjects interviewed were chosen according to specific criteria for age, gender, and geographic distribution. At the same time, the selection was determined by the representativeness of their responses. In other words, the interviews analyzed represent saturation of certain topics.

Argentine labor studies have, for the most part, tended to ignore workers outside large cities. They are mostly mentioned when considering migrations from the countryside to urban areas in the 1930s; or else when they participated as part of a “new working class” in the urban insurrections of the late 1960s: the Cordobazo, the Rosariazo, the Tucumanazo. And yet, there are a few studies and memoirs that suggest linkages between labor and the left throughout small cities and towns. For instance, Jorge Echenique studied the early presence of Anarchism in La Pampa and southern Córdoba Provinces; Gustavo Belek studied the Communists of the town of Monte Buey; Daniel Santamaría has delved into the story of Tucuman sugar workers in the 1920s; Carlos Tur researched the “Semana Trágica” of 1919 in Rosario city; Leónidas Cerruti has chronicled May 1st mobilizations in several small towns of Santa Fe Province; Víctor Barrios wrote a history of labor in the city of Río Cuarto; the Anarchist Domingo Varone and Communists Miguel Contreras, Jesús Manzanelli, Miguel Burgas, and Rufino Gómez have left us their fascinating memoirs. In addition, historians such as Waldo Ansaldi, Eduardo Sartelli, and Flavia Daniele have researched rural labor in the Pampas. In addition, I can mention my own research on the 1929 strike in San Francisco, and on Anarchism, Socialism, and Communism in the small towns of Córdoba Province.³ In all these cases the underlying thread seems to indicate that there

³ Jorge Etchenique, *Pampa Libre. Anarquistas en la pampa argentina* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2000); Gustavo Belek, *Los comunistas de Monte Buey*. Tesis de Licenciatura, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2005; Daniel Santamaría, *Las huelgas azucareras de Tucumán, 1923* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1984); Carlos Tur, *La Semana Trágica en Rosario*. Mimeo; Leonidas Ceruti, *Historia del Primero de Mayo en Rosario* (Rosario: Ediciones La Comuna, 2002); Víctor Barrios, *Rescate a los pioneros* (Río Cuarto, UNRC: 2000); Domingo Varone, *La memoria obrera* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Cartago, 1989); Miguel Contreras, *Memorias* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Testimonios, 1978). Miguel Burgas, *El primer diputado comunista. Año 1924* (Buenos Aires: Anteo, Colección); Rufino Gómez, *La Gran Huelga Petrolera de Comodoro Rivadavia (1931-1932) en la memoria del militante obrero comunista Rufino Gómez* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Centro de Estudios, 1973); Jesús Manzanelli, *La vida de un dirigente obrero comunista cordobés* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios Marxistas-Leninistas “Victorio Codovilla,” 1971); Flavia Daniele, *Block Obreros y Campesinos de Villa Huidobro y Partido Comunista Nacional: ¿Una simbiosis política? 1920-1928*, Tesis de Licenciatura en Ciencias Políticas de la Universidad de Río Cuarto, 2008 (Inédito); Mariana Mastrángelo, *Cultura y política en la Argentina: los comunistas en la huelga de 1929 en San Francisco, una ciudad del interior de Córdoba* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires/Editorial Imago Mundi, 2006); Mastrángelo. *Rojos en la Córdoba obrera, 1930-1943* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Imago Mundi, 2011).

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existed a strong development of Leftist tendencies amongst labor in small cities and towns throughout Argentina, whose characteristics can be better described as a culture or a “common sense” than as consolidated ideological expressions.

In this sense, researching labor in small cities and towns not only broadens our historical perceptions of Argentine workers, but it also introduces us in a world of feelings, values, and traditions that contribute to our understanding of the complexities of this social sector. As such, in this article I propose to explore how workers in these areas expressed themselves. Taking into account the different “clues” found in their testimonies, it would seem that their “common sense” shared many characteristics. These show up as an amalgamation of cultures and legacies, with two clear strains: one derived from different immigrant cultures, specifically those that were brought by Italian immigrants; and another derived from beliefs and life experiences in the countryside. This mixture of traditions can be defined as a “left worker culture.”

The reference to a “left worker culture” is based on Raymond Williams’ definition whereas “it is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behavior.” This type of behavior was termed, by Williams, to be “correct behavior,” “common sense,” and “structures of feeling.”⁴ What can be found upon examination of small cities and towns is a rich and complex labor movement based on a series of traditions and cultural expressions of a left or progressive nature.⁵ These traditions and expressions were not considered “politics” or “ideology,” but rather they were taken to be “correct behavior” or “common sense.” In other words, the average worker did not consider his or her actions to be “left” or “progressive” but rather as the way “things were always done,” which is why we call it a “worker culture.” This content can be seen when we look at the different ways and forms in which they expressed themselves. These forms constitute a “language of class” that expresses in words life experiences in the political, economic, and ethical-moral levels.⁶ This language was grounded in a tradition derived from 18th century artisans, which was common amongst 19th century workers, where labor was the source of all wealth and thus endowed with a whole series of ethical and moral values. At the same time, this notion determined a class cohesion, that is, an “us” versus “them” which implicitly questioned the logic

⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 57-70.

⁵ Raphael Samuel’s contributions on culture and politics are useful to understand this point. See Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso Books, 2006) and Samuel, *Theaters of Memory*, 2 vols. (London, Verso Books, 1994).

⁶ León Fink, “El radicalismo obrero en la edad dorada: hacia una cultura política,” in Pablo Pozzi y otros, *De Washington a Reagan: Trabajadores y conciencia de clase en los Estados Unidos* (Buenos Aires, Editorial Cántaro, 1990).

of profit and capital accumulation though it did not set out a concrete ideological alternative.⁷

At the same time, one of the ways we can approach the study of this culture is through the modes through which it has been transmitted from generation to generation. Oral tradition, states Raphael Samuel, “wells up from those lower depths – history’s nether-world – where memory and myth intermingle, and the imaginary rubs shoulders with the real. As a form of knowledge it is acquired higgledy-piggledy, in dibs and dabs, as in proverbs or jokes which children learn from one another in the playground, or in half-remembered incidents and events which are used to fill in the missing link of a story. It draws its sustenance from the spoken rather than the written word, though often, as with legendary histories of all kinds, there will be some chap-book, or chronicle original.”⁸

Oral tradition and worker culture in the Argentine provinces are defined by these experiences, meanings, and values; since they have not been able to express themselves in terms of the dominant culture they have remained as sediments in memory, forming a rich universe that is revealed through orality. As stated above, a series of interviews have been selected with male and female workers, political and trade union activists of different ideological and party affiliation, and from several small cities and towns in Córdoba Province. These interviews suggest clues and traces, and give indications of the complex cultural patterns that we are attempting to describe.

Let us consider the following example in the testimony of Rita Silva. Rita comes from a working class family in the city of Rio Cuarto and belonged, for years, to the Guevarist guerrillas of the Revolutionary Workers Party-Peoples’ Revolutionary Army (PRT-ERP).

Rita: Let me tell you my life in Rio Cuarto. Since I can remember, there was always the problem of Communists being persecuted. And they were my Grandmother’s neighbors. They were “The Russian” across the street, Cata who lived in front (who also belonged to the Communist Party), and Sarita, who ended up in [Villa] Devoto [prison for political prisoners] with us. They all belonged to the PC. And all the time, in my grandparents’ home, we would speak of nothing else: “look at those PC and what they do...” For instance, “the Russian owns the tenement and belongs to the PC.”⁹

In this interview fragment, Rita recalled what leftists she knew in her native city. The fact that she mentioned Communists is not unusual since the

⁷ It is suggestive to consider, regarding U.S. labor, the fine studies by Bruce Laurie: *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1980) and *Artisans Into Workers. Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, The Noonday Press, 1989).

⁸ Samuel, *Theaters of Memory*, 5-6.

⁹ Interview with Rita, by Pablo Pozzi. Córdoba, July 2004.

Communist Party (PC) had had a strong presence in Rio Cuarto and in the neighboring towns since the late 1920s. Though they were not the only leftists, since there were also Anarchists and Socialists, the Communists were noticeable for having a rich tradition in labor organizing among local workers.¹⁰ When Rita recalls who belonged to the Party, one can observe a certain contradiction in her story. On the one hand there is the image of the ‘Russian,’ the tenement owner. The underlying criterion seems to have been, both for Rita and her family, that being a ‘communist’ implied being a worker and thus poor. And yet, this militant was a property owner; in Rita’s words “the Russian was the owner of the tenement and belongs to the PC.” This evidences a certain discomfort since her value structure is determined by the role each person occupies in production relations, where there is a clear delimitation between “owners” and “workers,” an “us” versus “them.” This class language comes under stress in her narration since being a property owner grates against her ethical and moral values, whereas being a Communist tends to have a positive significance since she also identifies herself as a worker and a leftist.

This perception can also be more fully appreciated in Rita’s description of Cata, another one of the Communists who show up in her interview. Notice the use of adjectives and the importance she attaches to militancy:

Question: How did Cata earn her living?

Rita: Cata was one of this old geezer’s, the Russian’s tenants. I believe she used to clean homes, and was poor, like anybody. Cata was famous in Rio Cuarto, a very skinny woman, with a nose, and green eyes, and who always went around with a bullhorn in her car, calling on people to join the PC. She would be thrown in jail every other day.¹¹

Cata seems to fit more closely to what Rita considers to be “a communist.” Cata was a working woman, humble, who lived in a tenement, and was “poor, like anybody.” In other words, she was much like Rita and her family, who were also workers and poor. Here we can more easily see the interviewee’s identification with the Communist militant. Unlike the “Russian,” the fact that Cata is perceived to be part of the “we” universe that opposes “them” generates no contradictions for Rita. And yet, a notable aspect is that Cata was charged with calling on the people of Rio Cuarto to join the PC. The anecdote illustrates of a perception that we can term “common sense.” Not only did Rita remember this without any trace of irony or surprise, but she seemed to remember it fondly. In fact, she seemed to regard Cata’s proselytism as “correct” behavior; her “common sense” told her that this was expected behavior in a Communist. At the same time, if we consider the

¹⁰ Communists were the main organizers of the local Labor Federation (FOD) in 1935, which joined together many urban and rural workers in the area.

¹¹ Interview with Rita, *Op. Cit.*

anecdote in perspective, it is remarkable that a Communist in a fairly conservative and Catholic provincial city would publically enjoin fellow citizens to join the Party in the 1950s. This is even more notable if we take into account the harsh repression of Communists at the time, something Rita recalls several times during the interview. And yet, Rita considered it “natural” or “all right” that Cata would proselytize publically in the streets of Rio Cuarto. These mechanisms of memory are probably not conscious, where perhaps “the imaginary rubs shoulders with the real,” as Samuel suggests. What is important is not whether it is fact or fiction, but rather that it permits us to glimpse at a series of experiences and values in the perceptions held by our interviewees that suggest the existence of the leftist culture analyzed.

The following fragment comes from an interview with Mariano Planells, a Peronist former mayor in the city of San Francisco. Though Planells ascribes to different political and ideological conceptions from Rita, they are expressed in similar ways, with similar characteristics. In this case, we asked the interviewee if he remembered anyone in the city who belonged to the Communist Party. He said:

Mariano: There was one who was general secretary [*sic*] of Molinos Río de la Plata. Can you believe it? It seems incredible, Mangaterra, General Manager of Molinos Rio de la Plata [*a huge flour milling corporation*]. He was an upstanding man, but he remained as manager. And the guy, when the Communist Party paper arrived (I can't remember what it was called)... he personally took it to barbershops and places where people gathered.¹²

Once again we can note in the response what can be termed “common sense” or “correct behavior.” When Planells remembers a Communist in his city he defines him as “an upstanding man,” in spite of the fact that he is a “Red.” Planells is surprised that Mangaterra was a Communist and that he would be publically known as one in San Francisco, as he was the General Manager of one of the biggest corporations in Argentina.

These interviews suggest that when a Communist is termed “an upstanding man,” or when Cata goes out into the streets of Rio Cuarto, they are being defined in positive terms. At the same time, this suggests that there might be positive connotations to leftist criteria in spite of the fact that both Rita and Planells do not share political outlooks. One possible explanation is that our interviewees share cultural criteria that emerge when asked to remember or think about these individuals.

Another example can be found in the interview with lawyer and historian Roberto Ferrero, in his youth a member of Revolutionary Student Vanguard and then, for most of his life, a left nationalist. Ferrero, born in a

¹² Interview with Mariano Planells, by Alejandro Dugüeti. San Francisco, Córdoba Province, Abril 2000.

very small town in Cordoba Province called Porteña, was asked if he remembered when in 1958 the Communist Party won the mayoralty of the neighboring town of Brinkmann. He responded:

Roberto: [*Felix*] Stradella wins the same year that [*Arturo*] Frondizi is elected President. In San Francisco [*Guillermo*] Peretti of the UCRI* is elected mayor, and in Brinkmann Stradella wins. But he does not win because he is a Communist, but rather he wins in spite of it. When we met at the Radical [UCRI] Committee, when we found out that Stradella had won, we were not surprised because he was very popular. He was a very good football player, and besides a fine person and a Communist, and he just as well might have been a conservative, he would have been elected as well. They chose him. It was a small town. Besides Brinkmann had another characteristic which I later found out talking to my mother: immigration had not taken a very deep root, it was like an island. So much so, that the Piedmontese in San Francisco said it was a town of “*fuin*,” of blacks, or creoles. To give you an idea, my aunt Luisa had a boyfriend who was a musician, and much worse, he was “*fuin*” and a musician. They ran him off because of it. So, Brinkmann had a popular characteristic. Perhaps there were leftovers of the *montoneras*, of federalism, of the *criollo* way.** On the other hand, the *gringos* of San Francisco came from the combative traditions of Garibaldi, Mazzini, the Anarchists, and the Socialists.¹³

In his interview Ferrero manages to synthesize the fusion of cultural elements that can be defined as “leftist.” The first of them is the explanation given as to why Stradella is elected: “he does not win because he is a Communist, but rather he wins in spite of it.” Voters chose him because he was popular and a fine person. His “correct behavior” made it possible for a Communist to emerge victorious in this small town’s elections. And yet, this was not the first time this happened. In 1928, in the Cañada Verde railroad station (today the city of Villa Huidobro), in western Cordoba Province, another Communist had also been elected mayor: José Olmedo, a rural laborer. The fact that this is repeated thirty years later suggests the persistence over time of ethical and moral values, feelings and practices in popular sectors of small town Argentina.

Ferrero points out that Brinkmann “was a small town,” with popular characteristics. Here we have another leftist element, since he refers to a double heritage mentioned previously. On the one hand a popular strain,

* The UCRI was headed by Frondizi, and was the left wing of one of the traditional Argentine political parties (the UCR) dating back to the 1890s. Trans. Note.

** The *montoneras* were an armed band of gauchos who opposed the centralizing influence of Buenos Aires and the big cities; the *criollos* were the descendants of Spanish colonizers. *Gringos* is the term employed for Italian immigrants and their children. Trans. Note.

¹³ Interview with Roberto Ferrero, by Mariana Mastrángelo. Córdoba, August 2011.

which the interviewee links to leftover habits of the *Montoneras* and of Federalism, which he defines as “*criollos*.”¹⁴ On the other hand, Ferrero mentions the influence of Italian immigration in the neighboring city of San Francisco. The legacy of Garibaldi, Mazzini, the Anarchists, and the Socialists is clearly set apart from the popular element in Brinkmann. If we pay close attention, both legacies have a strong combative component. Ferrero emphasizes the “*criollo*” tradition as clear examples of opposition to centralization by Buenos Aires or Cordoba city; at the same time, he mentions the leftist traditions of Italian immigrants. Together, mixed and amalgamated, they give an idea of the complex structure that arises from feelings and life experiences that constitute the leftist cultural underworld.

To have a clearer image of the complexities of this cultural tradition linking urban and rural notions, let us consider the interview with Gregorio Flores, a Cordoba city automotive worker and PRT-ERP militant, who recalled his early life in the country:

Gregorio: I am from Northeast Cordoba, near the frontier with Santiago del Estero, called the Tulumba Department so you can have a notion of where it is... well, it is all *quebracho* and carob trees, mountain lions, wild boars, and very poor area. And, well, my family lived and I was raised in extreme poverty. I mean shoeless and lacking everything, mainly hungry due to... well, when they cut the trees in that area the rains left – I discovered that years later that rain disappeared because they had cut down the forest – and, well, it became a very arid zone, very arid. That was my infancy, in a very religious family where there was a lot of superstition, which left indelible marks that I still have, and which left me marked since childhood, for instance fear of hell, the appearance of the dead, and all those things that I heard in my childhood, and damaged me a lot, a lot.¹⁵

It is important to consider that the legacy of rural traditions, grounded in poverty and hunger, are constantly present in Flores’ testimony. The decades of political activism could not erase either the religious beliefs taught by his mother or what he terms superstitions, “those things I heard in my childhood.” When Flores moved to the city he carried, deep within his worldview, this family tradition constituting a residual culture that could still be seen in his testimony more than forty years later.

A similar example is that of Victor Barrios, a Communist construction worker, born in San Luis Province in the 1920s, though he lived in Rio Cuarto

¹⁴ The last uprising of the *Montoneras* happens in the 1870s. This tradition loses strength in the 20th century due to the influence of immigration in the area.

¹⁵ Interview with Gregorio Flores, by Pablo Pozzi. Buenos Aires, September 1994.

most of his life. In this fragment of his interview he explains why he did not become a Peronist.

Victor: I did not become a Peronist because... well, in truth I never trusted Peron much, cause he was a military officer. Perhaps, because since I was a child I never had much sympathy for *milicos*.^{***} That is how we called them, in the countryside where we lived in San Luis back then. The police and the military, well we had a certain allergy to them. They were the ones who repressed the peasants when they rebelled; or when they believed you were disrespectful or did not salute them they put you in jail, they repressed you. And I did not believe his message, because all the people who surrounded Peron were rich folks, and we had suffered their consequences since we were little.¹⁶

Barrios' memory of exploitation and repression comes from his experience in the rural areas where he was born. Again, what emerges is a language of class that distinguishes clearly between an "us," who suffer the consequences of exploitation, and "them," the rich, the police, the *milicos*. This worldview arises from a combination of cultural practices and family traditions that determines these peoples' lives, leading them to politics and militancy.

The same way, the traditions brought by Italian immigrants at the end of the 19th century remained very much alive in small cities and provincial towns of Argentina. Let us consider, for example, what the San Francisco historian, Joaquín Martínez, tells us about the Garibaldi Holidays. An interesting aspect of what he tells us is that Martínez belongs to the local bourgeoisie and has a long tradition of activism with the San Francisco conservatives.

The Garibaldi Holiday was a thrilling day. It began with a parade and ended with a parody of the assault on Papal Rome. The Libertador San Martin Avenue, which ran in front of the '20 Settembre e Lavoro' Italian Society, was where the warlike spectacle was held. The parade, presided by the leading personages of the Italian community, became more inflamed as it moved forward. Brows were furled, filled with warlike anger and overtaken by feelings of Italian unity, all suddenly transformed into [*Garibaldi's*] Red Shirts, ran along the avenue until they went past the 'Porta Pía', built for the occasion, shouting Roma nostra! Roma nostra! This Garibaldian episode ended with vermouth with nuts served in the Italian Society.¹⁷

*** *Milico*: a disrespectful term for a soldier. Trans. Note.

¹⁶ Interview with Víctor Barrios, by Pablo Pozzi. Rio Cuarto (Córdoba), September 2006.

¹⁷ Joaquín G. Martínez, *San Francisco, su tierra, la aldea, la escuela* (San Francisco, Editorial Fiore Hermanos, 1963), 56-58.

Italian adventurers and soldiers had followed Giuseppe Garibaldi to the Rio de la Plata. Ideological affinities had cemented the relationship between Mazzini Republicans and Buenos Aires Liberals.¹⁸ For political *emigrés* “between 1852 and 1862, Buenos Aires represented in the Argentine Republic, something similar to what Piamonte was for Italy between 1848 and 1861.”¹⁹ This linkage between processes led Garibaldi and his compatriots to fight against the government of Juan Manuel de Rosas. This made even more sense since Garibaldi considered himself to be an “internationalist” who had participated in the 1st International in Paris, and believed that he should struggle for freedom in every corner of the earth. This is why he travelled to South America in 1848, returned to Rome in 1849, and fought against the Prussians in 1860.²⁰ Some of Garibaldi’s followers remained to continue his struggle in Uruguay and Argentina, giving local Liberalism a strong “leftist” and Republican characteristic. This participation was extended, as a legacy, to the Italian immigrant community. In the Argentine provinces, especially in the *Pampa gringa*, many immigrants had participated in Garibaldi’s Legion or identified with his ideas.²¹

What these responses suggest, and considering that they encompass several different age ranges, is that this “left” culture has been transmitted from generation to generation. At the same time, these interviews indicate that one of the ways this has occurred is through familial oral transmission. Samuel explains that one of the ways to preserve popular memory is “family lore, as also in the stories, legends and songs which a child might learn at a grandmother or grandfather’s knee.”²² This form of transmission is the one least taken into account when carrying out historical research. This residual culture is present in family memory and is one of the links tended between history of persons and History with capital H.

This might be clearer in the following example, where rural workers Brígida and Lucy, mother and daughter and members of the PRT-ERP in Salta Province, remembered:

¹⁸ Lilia Ana Bertoni tells us that immigration, especially Italian, was seen as a threat by Argentine political leaders in the 19th century “be it due to the ghost of a disintegrating society, or because of the threat that national sovereignty might be questioned in the 1880s.” See Bertoni, *Patriotas, cosmopolitas y nacionalistas. La construcción de la nacionalidad argentina a fines del siglo XIX* (Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001), 17.

¹⁹ Hilda Sábato y Ema Cibotti, “Hacer política en Buenos Aires: los italianos en la escena política porteña 1860-1880,” *Boletín N° 2 del Instituto de Historia Argentina y Americana Dr. Emilio Ravignani*, 3era, Serie 1er. Semestre de 1990, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1990, p. 23.

²⁰ “Giuseppe Garibaldi’s Statement and its Effects on the Working Classes in Italy,” *Engels. Record of his Report at the General Council Meeting of November 7, 1871, The Eastern Post*. N° 163, November 11, 1871.

²¹ Hilda Sábato y Ema Cibotti. *Op. Cit.*, p. 25

²² Samuel, *Op. Cit.*, ps. 9.-11.

Brígida: Because the children have grown up hearing... I, for example, in my home, my uncle... I had an uncle who went to prison. He was an Anarchist, and then he would sit down to drink *mate* and tell me.

Lucy: He would spend hours talking about national politics.

Brígida: He would tell me and I would listen because I was interested. Because of all the suffering that others has passed. For instance, Indians; he lived with them and saw how they were slaughtered, how they were exploited in the sugar mill. All sorts of things: how they were fed, how they were sacrificed. All sorts. And I think that of all my brothers the only one who remembers is I, because none of them ever said 'my uncle told me.' And yet I paid attention... And well, he would gather them, just like me, and tell them.

Lucy: It was our grandfather's custom, her dad, who would arrive home and start talking politics, and we were there and listened, and it arose in our mind.²³

The story about the Anarchist uncle who transmits his experience of exploitation and struggle next to Indians, as well as the tradition that the grandfather would "talk politics," had an effect on Brígida and Lucy who appreciated and shared the stories, so that "it arose in our mind." These narrations have even more significance since both women recall that in their home "there was no newspaper, the only thing we had was the radio, we were very into radio theater."²⁴ In this context, orality is an essential element for the transmission of experience and an awareness of reality: both the uncle and the grandfather were charged with teaching the lessons of the past as well as telling the news of the day. They were the "transmitters" of oral tradition and, with time, Brígida did the same with her children. This is clear when she states that "he would gather them, just like me, and tell them."

In the same way, the narration of Mario Leiva, a Córdoba autoworker and an activist of Peronismo de Base, contains similar elements. His father, born in Tucumán Province, came from an Anarchist tradition, just like his grandfather. Mario's dad was also an accordionist and a composer of music who joined Peronism in 1945. In adolescence Mario got together with the musicians that came home with his father in the late 1950s: they were politicized and spoke of revolution. According to Leiva, "they were Red Peronists. Whenever they played in public they would end the concert by playing *La marcha Peronista* [the Peronist March] and would be thrown in jail. They called themselves 'The Emerald Orchestra'."²⁵ Once again family experience is recalled by the person interviewed as an explanation for taking a particular political stance. Music, contact with people who spoke of politics or

²³ Interview with Brígida and Lucy, by Pablo Pozzi. Salta, July 1995.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ Interview with Mario Leiva, by Pablo Pozzi. Buenos Aires, February 1994.

of revolution and life experience were determinant in Mario's politicization and activism.

The importance of family tradition can also be easily seen if we consider, once again, the interview with Roberto Ferrero. At one point he remembered his Italian grandmother and the songs he would ask her to sing:

Roberto: My Nona Rosa, together with my grandfather who was an unskilled worker in a bakery, and she was an autoworker at Fiat, was Socialist and Catholic. When she came to Argentina she went to the Church and joined Catholic Action; whatever the Church did, there she was. But when I asked her to sing something from the old country she would immediately begin singing *Bandiera Rossa** or else *The Internationale*, in Italian of course. She was not troubled by this, as she was not one to take Socialism to a philosophical extreme, meaning that you should be Socialist and an Atheist. Common people do not ask themselves those things. She voted Socialist and went to mass. Both things.²⁶

In this interview family memory is constituted by the experience that the Italian grandmother brought from the "old country." She was a Fiat worker, a Socialist and, at the same time, a Catholic. As Ferrero recalled, this did not generate a contradiction for Nona Rosa since her political affiliation was not philosophical but rather it came from a series of values and feelings, from "correct behavior." She transmitted these values to her grandson through songs and anecdotes, which Ferrero treasured as part of his life and political experience. At the same time, the fact that she would sing overtly "red" songs refers to her condition as a worker. That this was something generalized in early 20th century Argentina can be understood by the fact that labor demonstrations and parades would sing these songs as well as *The Marseillaise* and the Argentine National Anthem.

For instance, Víctor Barrios recalls a May 1st commemoration in Río Cuarto in the 1940s: "The colorfulness of their vestments was mixed with blue, white and red flags. They would all march in columns and accompanied by music and songs led by Don Pierino Rosso who would alternate the National Anthem, The Marseillaise, [*the Anarchist anthem*] Son of the People, and The Internationale."²⁷ A final example can be found in the memoirs of Miguel Contreras, the main Communist labor leader in Córdoba Province. In his *Memorias* he recalls the following anecdote:

* *Bandiera Rossa*, composed by Carlo Tuzzi in 1908 was a popular Socialist anthem, and later became very popular with Italian Communists. Translator note.

²⁶ Interview with Roberto Ferrero, *Op. Cit.*

²⁷ Víctor Barrios, *Rescate a los pioneros*, (Río Cuarto: Imprenta de la Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto, 2000), p. 11

In the year 1913 the unemployed organized a demonstration like I had never seen in this province, under the slogan Bread and Jobs. In front with their Argentine flags, red flags, and posters, went the workers' unions of bakers, printers, leather makers, shoemakers, and the banners of the [*Anarchist federation*] FORA and the Socialist Party. All the workers showed up with their tools [...] It was impressive to see such a crowd, a great number of male and female workers with the tools held up high, shouting their slogans and singing worker anthems, Son of the People, The Internationale, The Marseillaise.”²⁸

Contrera's anecdote represents a fusion of political and cultural traditions, which he recalls as something “impressive,” while at the same time it shows an example of what can be described as a left worker culture. At the same time, it is worthwhile to point out that the Communist leader seemed to find “normal” the coming together of unions, political tendencies, and even Anarchist and Communist songs with *The Marseillaise*, the revolutionary emblem of the sans culottes and even of Argentine Liberalism.²⁹ What stands out in Contrera's memoir are not the political and ideological differences, but rather that it was a labor demonstration of unemployed workers, where each worker raised his or her tools, giving it a distinctive class character.

This last example, together with interview excerpts cited, seem to indicate that both workers and popular classes in Argentina's small cities and towns shared a common experience, as defined by E. P. Thompson,³⁰ which was expressed in “correct behavior” and a “class language.” Altogether, these “clues” permits us to begin to unravel the complexities of worker culture in Argentina that might explain the persistence of relatively high levels of political involvement and labor mobilization throughout the 20th century. What is more, the widespread age range suggests a transmission of experience over decades, while the broad differences in political affiliation imply a sharing of perceptions and imagery among these workers. One possible explanation is that this ordinary culture is forged in the complexities of social production relations. If so, then horizontal class cohesion would seem stronger than other vertical identities. At the same time, these “class notions” would seem not only to have a workerist ideal but also to endow leftist ideas with positive values.

As such, it would seem that popular memory is based on an undercurrent grounded in a leftist underworld which, over the years, has managed to withstand dominant culture, repression, and even the left's own failure to live up to its own traditions. At times this hidden culture emerges and is registered as a spontaneous explosion. What the press reports as a passing or ingenuous fact, might find its origins in a tradition forged in the

²⁸ Miguel Contreras. *Memorias* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones Testimonios, 1978), p. 20.

²⁹ In the 1940s, *The Marseillaise* was adopted as an anthem of the anti-Peronist, mostly liberal, forces.

³⁰ E.P. Thompson, *Miseria de la teoría* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1981).

experience, struggles, and resistance of generations who have opposed capitalist exploitation. In the cases analyzed, the leftist tradition experienced since childhood by the workers considered seems to have determined their political and trade union participation once they reached adulthood. Clearly, this tradition did not determine a particular political affiliation, and most changed at least once during their life. And yet, Communists, Trotskyists, Peronists, Nationalists, and Guevarist guerrillas expressed themselves with a commonality of feelings and values. This does not mean that ideology or politics have no relevance in the imagery expressed in the testimonies, or that they shared conditions or suggested similar solutions. What it does imply is that they seem to share a common culture understood as a “correct behavior” that forged structures of feeling. This culture has influenced their lives to a degree where their political stance is felt to be a natural result.

As such, militancy cannot be considered as an “awakening” or as “youthful follies.” Politics throughout generations of Argentines is linked to a series of practices, feelings, and experiences that are shared by parents, children, uncles, and grandparents. In fact this implies the existence of specific popular memory that has endured over time enriching itself, resignifying, and most of all resisting.