

“Who Made the World?” Politics and Oral Sources in Argentine Labour Culture

Pablo Pozzi, Universidad de Buenos Aires, translated by author

Through the use of oral sources housed at the Universidad de Buenos Aires Oral History Program, this piece attempts a cultural approach to explaining the persistence of what could be termed a “left” culture in Argentina. This culture, presented here as “common sense,” is discussed through the analysis of popular songs and anecdotes. The main idea is that this culture expresses a consciousness “of itself” and that this has permitted the subsistence of an organized left in spite of repression and that it also contributes to explaining the persistence and harshness of social conflict over time. In addition, it focuses on the “common sense” implicit in the sources studied. Finally, it briefly discusses an implicit content of social relations that are perceived as “class struggle.”

It had only been a few years since the Spanish War had ended, and the cross and sword reigned over the ruins of the Republic. One of the defeated, an Anarchist worker, recently freed from prison, looked for work. Vainly did he search in heaven and on Earth. There was no employment for a Red. Everybody gave him a bad look, shrugged, or refused to listen. Wine was the only friend left to him. Late at night, looking at empty plates, he silently withstood his wife’s reproaches; a pious woman who went daily to mass. Meanwhile, his young son would read him the catechism.

Many years later, Josep Verdura, the son of that damned worker, told me the story. He told it to me when I arrived exiled in Barcelona. He told me: he was a desperate child, who wanted to save his Father from eternal damnation. The stubborn atheist would not listen to reason.

But Dad, – said Josep crying – if God does not exist, who made the world?

Fool – said the hunched over worker – Fool. The world was made by us, bricklayers.¹

Antonio Baltar, an engineer and university professor, exiled in 1965, and who later worked for the CEPAL [Comisión Económica y Política para América Latina y el Caribe], ended his life story by telling me what he had heard in the street from a cobbler. Baltar told me that, having accidentally run into the cobbler, a former political prisoner like himself, the man told

¹ Eduardo Galeano, *El libro de los abrazos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1989), 2.

him what had happened when he was interrogated by a Colonel. The Colonel had asked the cobbler: “Don So and so, do you like the cinema?” He responded: “Colonel, I am a cobbler, I have six sons, there is barely enough money to buy food for my children.” The Colonel stated: “But, you are a Communist.” The cobbler responded: “Look here, I seem to have heard something said about that Communist thing, but I have no idea what it means.” Then the Colonel went to his desk and pulled out of a drawer a photo of the Elite Cinema, in Campo Grande. An homage to [*Communist leader*] Luiz Carlos Prestes. To the left, the fourth person was the cobbler. No doubt about it. Then the man pointed at the photo and said: “Colonel, Virgin Mary, this man looks so much like me!”²

Both testimonies are interesting. First of all they are seductive: both tell of a story where the protagonists, even in defeat, refuse to give up. So they give us an almost heroic image of the Anarchist and the Communist. Even when confronted by inescapable proof one concedes to repression, while the other, crushed by defeat, insists on transmitting to his son the dignity which conforms the central tenet of his cause. Second, they are both typical stories: a beginning establishes the situation; a development where the protagonist is pushed to the abyss; and a conclusion where he overcomes and establishes his humanity. Perhaps one of the more interesting elements in both testimonies is that they “sound” true, especially in terms of sentiments: we want them to be true, that human dignity triumphs over oppression. But, third of all, are they true?

In reality we have no idea. Even more, not even the persons who tell us the story know if it is true, though when they do so they establish that they accept their veracity. Baltar tells Montenegro what a prison comrade, a cobbler, told him. In turn Galeano tells us what he says Josep Verdura told him. In neither case is there a single element of proof, or evidence as to the truth of what we have been told. What is more, we do not even know if what Montenegro and Galeano set down is really what they have been told or simply what they wanted to hear, and thus a fabrication. And yet, both authors, just like the reader, tend to accept the stories as true, or else to not care if they are true or not. Why? The only possible answer is that these narratives call up a “common sense” constructed over decades. What it suggests is that in popular imagination Anarchists are examples of dignity and principled stands, just like the Communist gives proof of intelligence and fast wit; they seem to imply that if they are revolutionaries, then they are exceptional human beings. In a sense both testimonies remind us of the novel *Pedro y el capitán*, by Mario Benedetti, where the captured guerrilla

² Antonio Torres Montenegro, *Veredas de la Memoria y Metodología e Historiografía*. Mimeo. 1995, 38-39.

triumphs even in the midst of torture; or of Julius Fucik's *Notes from the Gallows*, where the Communist is able to resist even in a Nazi concentration camp.

This is not simply about credulity, but rather about a "structure of feeling," as explained by Raymond Williams, whereas the politicized worker is a repository of criteria of dignity, firmness, and most of all liberating principles. In other words, it is not an issue of just "being a rebel," but also of having emancipatory ideas that lead to "rebelliousness." The key thing is not rebelliousness itself but rather the ideological characteristic of the protagonists. Both stories would sound false if they were Fascists or Nationalists. Instead, the mere fact that Verdura's father is an Anarchist, in Argentine culture, lends the story an automatic acceptance and is perceived as true.

Last of all, the above often cannot be perceived in written documents. This is mostly due to the fact that writing contains a heavy imprint of the logical processes (more or less rational) of the writer. This tends to minimize, and often to suppress, feelings which are considered alien to a document, a police report, or a journalistic piece. By this I do not mean to say that there is no subjectivity in written sources; in fact, all written documents reflect not only what they set down, but also how the writer values and sees what is written. Thus, though a written document is also a source for analyzing subjectivity, this becomes more evident, more explicit, in oral sources. It is in stories, traditions, testimonies, in other words in orality, where we can more easily approach "structures of feeling."

Oral History uses its sources as a privileged access to a world that, in general, is not set down in written sources. The construction of our oral sources has tended to focus on the interview process, where researcher and interviewee construct a new source through the complex rules of evocation and memory. And yet, oral tradition is also a valuable tool for the historian. Raymond Williams defined "tradition" as "an oral handing down [...] a general word for matter handed down from father to son,"³ which presupposes an eminently oral form. He also specified that all tradition is "intentionally selective of a configured past and present, which then results to be powerfully operative within the cultural and social process and identification" that constitute subaltern subjectivity.⁴ One of the key elements, besides testimonies, to trace the subaltern subjectivity through generations, is that of oral traditions handed down from parents to children, which conform to popular culture and lore.

At the same time, and referring to his study on "*les camisards*" of 18th century France, Philippe Joutard clarifies the importance of oral tradition as a key source for the historian: "After two centuries, the memories remained precise and alive due to the processes of legend. Historical reflection will be carried out, at the

³He also explained that it is concept which is hard to define with any precision. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 319.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxismo y literatura* (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1980), 137.

same time, on the election of collective memory, but also of all the annexed 'invented' details, which by no means express a lesser collective sensibility."⁵ Of course, to pose that any legend, anecdote, story, or song registers traces of the past reveals a surprising ingenuity. But this is not a reason to automatically discard them. As a source, their usefulness is derived from the objectives and uses that the historian makes of them. An interview contains elements which can contribute precise information (which can be checked against other sources) as well as a plethora of opinions, impressions, and memories that contribute to understanding the subjectivity of an historical phenomenon. The same can be said of other oral sources. In fact, one of the more interesting aspects of oral tradition is that it permits us to trace subjectivities and that incredibly complex world that Raphael Samuel termed "theaters of memory."⁶ Specifically it permits us to access, through various generations, cultural patterns, motivations, and a world which has been termed "subaltern classes." Effectively, songs, poems, jokes, and anecdotes can constitute an important source to understand the subjectivity of the exploited. The common characteristic of all these sources is their orality: they are made, remembered, and transmitted orally and do not have the same strength or meaning when they are merely read in silence as their evocation is to feelings and emotions (subjectivity) and not to reason. Thus, they become a central element to understand the persistence of "structures of feeling" that constitute cultures in counterpoint to hegemonic and dominant ones.

It should be made clear that traditions which are transmitted from generation to generation are not immutable, and their meaning is not unique or unequivocal. In fact, each age picks and chooses from traditions in its past and resignifies them according to reality and needs. For instance, in 1991 striking Argentine railroad workers chanted "if in '61 they couldn't beat us, in '91 even less so." The reference was to the harsh railroad strike of 1961. And yet, the 1961 strike ended in a defeat and a rollback of the railroad workers movement. But what railroad workers remembered thirty years later, was not the result of the strike but rather a powerful tradition of struggle based on what is remembered as having fought with dignity and heroism. What is transmitted, over several decades and with varied meanings, is a notion of "us versus them" which is used to give cohesion to a specific social class, forming a structure of feeling that underlies and articulates different behaviors through granting new meanings to past traditions and thus "teaching" a collective "correct" behavior. Thus, tradition is maintained and changed at the same time according to social context and need (in this case of conflict) becoming an element which articulates labour culture and, with experience, class consciousness.

⁵ Philippe Joutard, *Esas voces que nos llegan del pasado* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), ch. 7.

⁶ Raphael Samuel, *Theaters of Memory*, 2 vols. (London: Verso Books, 1994).

In the Argentine case one of the most outstanding aspects is the persistence of a series of elements and perceptions that contest and generate serious problems to the dominance of the ruling classes and which are transmitted through oral tradition. In reality, these elements constitute a class culture, an “us” against “them,” which underlies the practices of popular mobilization, as well as the permanent rebuilding of left leaning organizations, and a notable combativeness, all in spite of the relatively constant repression carried out by the State. In fact, the notion of social class is in and of itself inseparable from the structures of feeling which form the cements that binds it together.⁷ It is here where oral history can make a crucial contribution through the analysis of class traditions expressed through different oral sources.

As was studied by James Petras⁸ and Daniel James,⁹ Argentine workers have historically expressed a strong class feeling that in some cases has been conflated with what is termed Peronist culture. Far from being Peronist or merely “hybrid,” labour culture¹⁰ in Argentina has traditionally developed a strong perception of us versus them, where the bourgeoisie has been identified not only as different but as an antagonist. This does not imply any kind of “revolutionary” criteria, but rather a series of traditions, customs, and uses that are translated into a dispute over control of the point of production.¹¹

In Argentina what can be termed “culture” or “common sense” is intertwined with concepts traditionally linked to leftist notions: good is considered a part of solidarity, “*compañerismo*,” the union; whereas in general, employers are uniformly considered to be exploiters. When the restaurant workers’ union leader, Luis Barrionuevo, stated: “in Argentina you do not make money working,” everyone knew what he was talking about. It was common sense that the rich are thieves.

This culture, or common sense, harks back to the formation of the Argentine working class towards the end of the 19th century. Thus it could be found in political songs and popular music or in stories and anecdotes of the time.

⁷ Williams, op. cit.

⁸ James Petras, “Terror and the Hydra: the Resurgence of the Argentine Working Class,” in James Petras, Eugene Havens, Morris Morley, and Peter DeWitt, *Class, State and Power in the Third World* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981).

⁹ Daniel James, “Racionalización y respuesta de la clase obrera: contexto y limitaciones de la actividad gremial en la Argentina,” *Desarrollo Económico* 83 (Octubre-Diciembre 1981).

¹⁰ José Nun, *Averiguación sobre algunos significados del peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Espacio, 1994).

¹¹ This struggle over control of production implies a tacit, and in many cases unconscious, dispute not only of the distribution of the product of labour but also of private property per se. Private property over the means of production is that which permits ever increasing appropriation of surplus value. Questioning how surplus value is distributed, or who determines the rhythm of production, implies attacking private property itself.

As a comparative element for more properly Argentine sources, let us briefly consider the Anarchist anthem, *Son of the People* (Hijo del Pueblo), sung in most working class acts between 1880 and 1920.

Son of the People¹²

Son of the people, chains oppress you
And this injustice cannot continue.
If your existence is a world of grief
Death is better than being a slave
Those profoundly selfish bourgeoisie,
Who thus tear apart humanity, will be
Swept away by the anarchists
At the strong cry of liberty!
Oh, red banner
No more suffering!
The exploitation
Has to surrender.
Raise yourself up, loyal people,
At the cry of the social revolution.
Vindication,
There is nothing to lose.
Only the union
Will be able to demand it.
Our banner
You will not break.
Clumsy Bourgeoisie!
Get back! Get back!

Hijo del Pueblo Himno revolucionario

Hijo del pueblo te oprimen cadenas
y esa injusticia no puede seguir
si tu existencia es un mundo de penas
antes que esclavo prefiero morir.

Esos burgueses, asaz egoístas,
Que así desprecian la Humanidad,

¹² http://struggle.ws/spain/song_sons_of_people.html

Serán barridos por los anarquistas
Al fuerte grito de Libertad.

¡Ah! Rojo pendón
no más sufrir,
la explotación
ha de sucumbir.
Levántate, pueblo leal,
Al grito de revolución social.
Vindicación no hay que pedir
sólo la unión
la podrá exigir.
Nuestro pavés
No romperás.
Torpe burgués
¡Atrás! ¡Atrás!

The images evoked are clear: the bourgeois are selfish, clumsy, and despise humanity. In stark counterpoint workers are presented as struggling against slavery, whose suffering shall end with the struggle of the people united in their loyalty to freedom. Its appeal is to sentiments, and not to reason, and to the common sense of workers, where “the people” is equivalent to all those who work and not live off others’ labour. The heroic tone, the vindication of human dignity faced by its bourgeois antithesis reminds of the many expressions of 18th century artisan radicals (specifically of the *sans culottes*) and of the writings of Thomas Paine. Thus they are clearly intertwined with an accepted common sense that is easily linked to popular imagination even today. The impact of these Anarchist and class notions – at least in Argentina – can be visualized in an anecdote repeated tirelessly by generations of Argentine workers, without consideration for their political or ideological affiliation:

An Anarchist was standing on a corner of Buenos Aires city. Suddenly he faints due to hunger as he has not eaten for a long time. People pick him and find a wad of money in his pocket. “But, if you have money, why do you not buy food?,” they ask him. The Anarchist responds: “Because it is the union’s money.”

The implicit concepts should be clear: it is not an adhesion (or comprehension) of Anarchism as an ideology, but rather it is a concept transmitted over generations that Anarchists (and thus “lefties”) are honest, unlike current labour leaders. Once again, the underlying theme is that work is dignified

and honest, and if Anarchism is for the worker then, by extension, they should be dignified and honest. Thus, the most common critique of the Left in Argentina is not ideological, but rather that it does not uphold what it preaches and live up to its ideals: nobody would think of endowing traditional politicians or businessmen with values such as honesty or solidarity, and thus you cannot criticize them for not upholding values they cannot have.

Both *Hijo del Pueblo* and the anecdote have a transparent meaning. That this meaning transcends the ideological-political plane can be seen if we briefly consider two tangos. The tango was a very characteristic Argentine form of urban music (specifically of Buenos Aires) that fused different musical forms and whose lyrics are expressed mainly in “*lunfardo*,” that is the slang common in poor neighborhoods. The first was the most popular tango in 1932, while the second was popular towards the end of the 1920s.

**Se viene la maroma
(Batistela, Romero y Delfino)**

Cachorro de bacán,
Andá achicando el tren;
Los ricos hoy están
Al borde del andén.
El viento del cobán,
El auto y la mansión,
Bien pronto rajarán
Por un escotillón.
Parece que está lista y ha rumbiao
La bronca comunista para este lao;
Tendrás que laburar para morfar...
¡Lo que te van a gozar!
Pedazo de haragán,
Bacán sin profesión;
Bien pronto te verán
Chivudo y sin colchón.

¡Ya está! ¡Llegó!
¡No hay más que hablar!
Se viene la maroma sovietista.
Los orres ya están hartos
De morfar salame y pan,
Y hoy quieren morfar ostras
Con sauternes y champán.

Aquí ni Dios se va a plantar
El día del departo a la romana
Y hasta tendrás que entregar a tu hermana
Para la comunidá...
Y vos que amarrocás
Vintén sobre vintén,
La plata que ganás
Robando en tu almacén.
Y vos que la gozás
Y hacés el parisién,
Y solo te tragás
El morfi de otros cien...
¡Pa' todos habrá goma, no hay cuidao...!
Se viene la maroma pa' este lao:
El pato empezará a dominar...
¡cómo la vamo a gozar!

Pedazo de haragán,
Bacán sin profesión;
Bien pronto te verán
Mangando p'al buyón.

[Rich man's puppy / slow down your train / the rich are now / at the end of
the station / the money in the bank / the car and the mansion / will soon go down
the toilet / It seems that is ready and is heading / this way / the Communist anger /
You will have to work to eat / Are we going to enjoy it / You lazy bastard /
Wealthy without a skill / They will soon see you / bearded and without a bed. / / /
That is it. It is here / No more talking / The soviet tide has arrived / The poor are
tired of eating salami and bread / and now want to eat oysters / with Sauterne and
Champagne / Neither God or anyone will be saved / the day all must share / And
you will even have to hand over your sister / for the community / And you who
hide cent by cent / the money that you make / stealing in your shop / And you
who enjoy yourselves / playing Parisian / And all alone swallow / the food of a
hundred / For all there will be beatings, don't you worry / The tide is coming this
way / The ones below will dominate / are we going to be happy / / / You lazy
bastard / Wealthy without a skill / Soon they will see you / Asking for handouts to
eat.]

Observe the images in this tango: just like in the Anarchist vision, the
bourgeois are lazy, without education or a skill, and their life is geared towards
conspicuous consumption. But at the same time, the typical bourgeois is ... a
shopkeeper. This probably reflects the fact that in Argentine labour tradition the

neighborhood shopkeeper is considered the archetype of the rich exploiter, since it is the person with whom the worker deals on a daily basis; what is more in many working class neighborhoods the shop was owned by the factory owners. Even more so, though the tango clearly expresses the *machismo* and sexism of the times, its positive view of the Soviet Revolution is also quite evident. Still, the latter is not understood as an ideological proposal, but rather as a revenge of the downtrodden. Several of these themes are repeated in the second tango:

Haragán
(Romero, Bayón Herrera y Delfino)

La pucha que sos reo y enemigo de yugarla,
La eskena se te frunce
Si tenés que laburarla.
Del orre batallón vos sos el capitán,
Vos creés que nacistes pa' ser un sultán.
Te gusta meditarla
Panza arriba en la catrera
Y oír las campanadas del reló de Balvanera.
Salí de tu letargo, ganate tu pan,
Si no, yo te largo, sos muy haragán.

Haragán,
Si encontrás al inventor del laburo lo fajás;
Haragán,
Si seguís en ese tren yo te amuro; cachafáz,
Grandulón,
Prototipo de atorrante,
Robusto
Gran bacán,
Despertá
Si dormido estás, pedazo de haragán.

El día del casorio dijo el tipo e' la sotana:
"El coso debe siempre
mantener a su fulana,"
y vos interpretás las cosas al revés;
que yo te mantenga es lo que querés.

Al campo a cachar giles,
Qu'el amor no da pa' tanto,

A ver si se entrevera
Por que yo ya no la aguanto.
Si en tren de cara rota pensás continuar
“Primero de Mayo” te van a llamar.

[Damn you are a bum and an enemy of work / Your back shrinks / If you have to use it / You are the captain of the bum battalion / You believe you were born to be a Sultan / You like to meditate / belly up in your bed / and listen to the ringing of the city bells / Out of your lethargy, earn your bread / If not I'll dump you, you are so lazy /// Lazy / if you find who invented work you beat him up / Lazy / If you keep it up I'll wall you, you thief / Big guy / Bum prototype / Robust / Big rich guy / Wake up / If asleep you are, lazy piece. /// The day of the wedding said the guy in the cassock / "The guy must always / keep his broad" / you interpreted things the other way around / that I keep you is what you want /// to the countryside to catch idiots / Love cannot stand so much / Let's see if the mess ends / cause I cannot take it / If cheeky you want to remain / "May First" they will call you.]

Once again, the central theme is that work dignifies, all mixed up with sexist and *machista* criteria. But at the same time there are two noteworthy things. The “lazy” person believes he “is a Sultan” and is defined as a “big rich guy,” in other words as a bourgeois and a rich exploiter. At the same time, the final expression is also indicative: Why May First and not holiday, Sunday or Christmas? The answer should be obvious: because on May First workers rest, while the other days do not hold a significance of class dignity and labour conquest; what is more, only Labour Day exists in contrast to bourgeois exploitation. The images evoked by both tangos remind us of the Anarchist anthem, where “us” is working people (“we made the world” as Verdura told Galeano) while “they” are lazy, clumsy, selfish, exploiters. The popularity of both tangos shows that these concepts were commonly accepted and as such were part of a specific view of the world held by Argentine workers at the time.

That the above was not merely a passing fad, but that it constitutes a specific political labour culture is evidenced by the lyrics of the anthem of Peronism, the main Argentine political movement. Consider, briefly

La marcha peronista

Los muchachos peronistas
Todos unidos triunfaremos,
Y como siempre daremos
Un grito de corazón:
¡Viva Perón! ¡Viva Perón!

Por ese gran argentino
Que se supo conquistar
A la gran masa del pueblo
Combatiendo al capital.

¡Perón, Perón, qué grande sos!
¡Mi general. Cuánto valés!
¡Perón, Perón, gran conductor!
¡Sos el primer trabajador!

Por los principios sociales
Que Perón ha establecido
El pueblo entero esta unido
Y grita de corazón:
¡Viva Perón! ¡Viva Perón!

Por ese gran argentino
Que trabajó sin cesar,
Para que reine en el pueblo
El amor y la igualdad.

[The Peronist guys / All united we will triumph / and as always / we'll give a heartfelt cry / Long live Peron!, Long live Peron! / / / For that great Argentine / who was able to conquer / the great mass of the people / Struggling against capital. / / / Peron, Peron, how great you are / My General, you are worthy / Peron, Peron, great leader / You are the first worker / / / For the social principles / That Peron has established / The whole people is united / And screams from the heart / Long live Peron! Long live Peron! / / For that great Argentine / Who worked ceaselessly / So that among the people will reign / Love and equality]

The Peronist March could easily be a variant of a leftist anthem. Once again themes are repeated: equality, the critique of capital, and Perón as a worker. The antithesis should be obvious: capitalists don't work; they do not desire equality, and are against love. And here Oral History reveals something quite suggestive: Peronism not only presents itself as an heir that overcomes the Left, but it also resignifies a whole series of structures of feeling which are strongly rooted in Argentine labour tradition and in worker subjectivity, thus suggesting one of the principal reasons for its subsistence and political strength over half a century. As the Peronists themselves say: "it is feeling" [*sentimiento*].

That these concepts survive at least until the 1990s can be considered not only due to the survival of these songs within popular culture but also to the

following story that circulated in labour circles around 1995. The story is revealing of the intertwining of class traditions and the feeling that many Argentine workers have as to the deterioration of their standard of living over the past decades: in this perception the causes for this situation can be found more in the actions of government and employers than in labour itself. Even more, business and government are presented as useless, inefficient, and the cause of the nation's problems, in spite of the fact that they tend to blame workers. In this sense the story reveals, once more, the underground subsistence of a subjectivity that is expressed in traditions shaping a determined structure of feeling. This subjectivity is what, even today, still generates class cohesion and a high level of labour militancy. In other words, in spite of numerous defeats and rollbacks, of the death of thousands of activists, of the increase in unemployment and the destruction of forms of organization, these traditions permit the persistence of class perspective, translated in cultural notions that unites Argentine labour in defense of its interests. The story, called "The Story of the Oarsman," goes like this:

At an international rowing match, the Argentine team lost to the Japanese coming in an hour after their rivals. To analyze such an unforeseen result the Argentine Rowing Committee's exhaustive analysis discovered that the problem was the team's formation. The Japanese had used ten oarsmen and a coxswain, while the Argentines had ten coxswains and an oarsman. They decided to totally revamp the team for the next year. Unfortunately, in spite of the revamping, the Argentines arrived two hours behind the Japanese. The next evaluation showed that this time the Argentine team had been composed of one coxswain, two assistant coxswains, seven section heads, and one oarsman. Instead, the Japanese had surprised the Argentines by showing up with the same team as the previous year. This time the Rowing Committee decided to really reorganize the team by introducing novel modifications that would result in increased efficiency levels so as to humiliate even Peter Drucker (a world renowned great oarsman). However, this time the Japanese came in three hours ahead of the Argentines. The new analysis revealed chilling conclusions. The Japanese had disconcerted the Argentines by showing up, once again, with ten oarsmen and one coxswain. Instead, the Argentines had used an innovative vanguard formation including: one empowerment adviser, one downsizing supervisor, one procedures analyst, one technology expert, one controller, one time keeper, one coxswain, two section heads, and one oarsman. After several days of intensive discussions the Committee decided to punish the oarsman by withdrawing all bonuses and incentives. In addition, the following year a new oarsman would be hired through

outsourcing so as not to be hampered by labor unions and inefficient labor contracts. Finally, the Committee concluded that there were four morals to this story:

1. There is no justice in rowing matches;
2. The Japanese use steroids;
3. The oarsman was reactive instead of proactive, he was lazy, and did not stick to the vision, objectives, strategy, and tactics of the new system, and what is more he was not a team worker;
4. Because of people like the oarsman our nation does not progress.

From 1998 to 2002 there arose a sizeable unemployed workers movement with tens of thousands of members. This movement organized barter clubs, mobilized to stop housing evictions, and struggled to obtain government aid and jobs. The movement's main tactic has been to blockade national highways and cities: there were 514 blockades in 2000, and 638 in the first half of 2001. In addition, labor carried out 414 strikes in the first six months of that year including four general strikes, ten national strikes by teachers, and eight by transportation workers. There have been popular riots in townships such as General Mosconi and Tartagal. In these townships the oil giant Repsol has large refineries that, rather than employ local oil workers, either import foreigners or bring people in from other provinces.¹³

How can one explain the rich history of labor militancy over more than a century without taking into account the subjectivity expressed in oral traditions? Argentine labor participated in the first May Day in 1890; had an early presence of Anarchist and Socialist organizations; was amongst the founders of the three Internationals; elected the first Socialist congressperson in America in 1905, and the first Communist in 1924; it elected the first Communist mayor in 1928 and established one of the first feminist labour newspapers at the end of the 19th century; and it consistently maintained a high rate of labor actions throughout the 20th century. At the same time, an analysis of the 1966 to 1976 left wing guerrillas shows that many came from small towns, and many were from labour families.¹⁴ Cities like Cruz del Eje, Rio Cuarto, Morteros, and San Francisco, in Cordoba Province, or Venado Tuerto, Rafaela, Felicia, and Reconquista in Santa Fe, or Diamante and La Paz in Entre Rios, had an important number of its citizens

¹³ General Mosconi and Tartagal are two small town in northern Salta Province, near Perú. Each town has almost 15,000 inhabitants. In 1925 petroleum deposits were discovered in the area by the national Petroleum Company (YPF). When YPF was privatized in the 1990s, and bought by the Spanish oil corporation Repsol, many of its employees were fired and both towns entered into an economic crisis that laid the groundwork for the 2001 riots.

¹⁴ Pablo Pozzi, *Por las sendas argentinas... El PRT-ERP, la guerrilla marxista* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2001).

joining the Left and guerrilla organizations.¹⁵ The analysis of oral traditions contributes to finding a clue to explaining this militancy through labor and popular subjectivity.

Oral History, and the use of different oral sources, permits an approximation to the subjectivity that made this leftist development possible. The contributions of Oral History are not limited to the methodological plane: it generates new perspectives, fosters debates, and thus enriches historical knowledge. In this sense, Oral History not only deals with the recovery and preservation of previously marginalized sectors, but it also suggests new ways of studying consciousness and behavior.

The examples cited above should be more that suggestive for all those interested in Argentine labour history, especially since they seem to indicate that our traditional perceptions regarding Argentine workers do not fit reality. They suggest that class, or horizontal, loyalties are more important than political, or vertical, affiliations; that Peronist anti-leftism existed, but within limits among common workers; and that the process of leftist politicization and militancy had more to do with worker experience than with programmatic issues. If this is so, then it implies a broader, more heterogeneous and fluid politicization than has been considered up to now. This would make us reconsider many of our premises on the structuring of contemporary Argentine political society.

Evidently, the importance of these oral sources is not whether they are implicitly true or not, but rather that they grant us a possibility to trace sentiments and feelings over time. In all memory, and in every tradition, we can find elements of fact and fiction, and of the sentiments of a specific historical period. Political memory is not constructed from the present towards the past. Rather it is a dialectical relationship between both and between them and the life and culture of those we interview or the oral sources we consider. In this sense it is closer to a “structure in solution” or to a living and dynamic experience whose lessons and uses are always changing though anchored in a really existing past. Each particular testimony marks differences and similarities in the memory of Argentine workers. The similarities in descriptions and perspectives that show up in oral sources, beyond regional origin, skill, ideology, race or gender, represent a series of traditions (almost a folklore) that can be interpreted, in this case, as a labour or leftist culture. These traditions are translated in common structures of feeling. Taken as a whole, this type of source seems to have a singular vitality and a permanent updating of labour ideals that turn them into a subaltern and anti-establishment ideology.¹⁶

¹⁵ Pablo Pozzi and Alejandro Schneider, *Los “setentistas.” Izquierda y clase obrera (1969-1976)* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2000).

¹⁶ Ideology here is used in the sense of a “system of beliefs characteristic of a group of a particular class,” and of a “general process of production of ideas and meanings.” Williams, *op.cit.*, 71.