A Desire to Formalize Work? Comparing Trade Union Strategies in Bolivia and Argentina

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Abstract
This article examines understandings of work within trade unions of street vendors in El Alto, Bolivia, and state employees in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The particular emphasis is on the distinction between formality and informality in both spheres, and the boundary between formal and informal is analyzed both as a way to organize the description of work (as employment) and as an object of union activism understood as a form of political work. The unions deal with that boundary differently in the two countries, and it is more salient for informants in Argentina than in Bolivia. Further, as an object of the political work of a trade union, it is also managed differently by each of the two Argentine public sector unions discussed here.

Keywords: street vendor unions, public sector unions, formal and informal organizations, Bolivia, Argentina

This article is part of a larger research project that examines the role of trade unions in the constitution of citizenship and political agency in El Alto, Bolivia, and Buenos Aires, Argentina. The article approaches the question through an investigation of the interrelations between work, citizenship, and the state in the context of informal and formal sector employment in the two locations. My focus is specifically street vendors in El Alto and state employees in Buenos Aires, and I examine understandings of work within the trade unions associated with each activity. The particular emphasis here is on the distinction between formality and informality in both spheres. The boundary between formal and informal serves here both as a way to frame the description of work and as an object of union activism understood as a form of political work, particularly in the case of Argentina. It is dealt with differently in the two countries, being more salient for my informants in Argentina than in Bolivia. Further, as an object of the political work of a trade union, it is also managed differently by each of the two unions I worked with in Argentina.

El Alto and Buenos Aires
In the city of El Alto, I and others have argued that individual citizenship is mediated through membership in different corporate entities: the neighborhood council, the council of school parents, trade unions (Lazar 2008; Wanderley 2009). Those entities both mediate between the citizen and the state and substitute for the state in particular circumstances. Hence, the Federation of Street Vendors of the City of El Alto both represents its affiliated organizations and their members in negotiations with local authorities and regulates commerce in El Alto in important ways – granting permits to sell, ensuring upkeep of stalls, organizing the cleaning of the streets, and so on, thus substituting for the state in a number of regulatory functions. Because many of the organizations, including unions, bring together people who are self-employed, the state (rather than the employer) is the principal interlocutor. Thus, the experience of citizenship for citizens of El Alto is utterly entwined with practices of collective organization on the basis of residence or occupation. This is especially so because membership in these organizations is not precisely voluntary: all parents of the children at one particular school are members of the school parents’ council; all those who sell in a particular street are members of the relevant street vendors’ association; all minibus drivers who drive a particular route are members of that union. Active participation is less obligatory, but it is common to fine those who do not attend meetings or demonstrations, so some form of participation is expected (a question I discuss in more detail in Lazar 2008). Research in El Alto was conducted over a series of visits from 1999 to 2004, including 15 months in 1999 to 2000 and 5 months in 2003. Ethnographic research was conducted with residents of El Alto, local community and parents’ organizations, and leaders within the Federation of Street Vendors of the City of El Alto. I conducted interviews; attended public events, meetings, assemblies, and demonstrations; and observed day-to-day life in the Federation’s offices.

The starting point for my current research was to ask whether trade unions mediate citizenship in Buenos Aires in a similar way. This sets up an axis of comparison between Bolivia and Argentina, or, more properly, between the two cities of El Alto and Buenos Aires. I then set up a further axis of comparison within Buenos Aires itself through comparing the “old” labor movement as represented by the Confederación General...
del Trabajo (CGT, or General Confederation of Labor) to the “new” forms of unionism represented by the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (Argentinean Workers’ Central, or CTA). During the course of fieldwork, that comparison was further refined, into one between two unions of public sector workers, one from each workers’ central, the Unión del Personal Civil de la Nación (Union of National Civil Servants, hereafter UPCN) and the Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado (Association of State Workers, hereafter ATE).

Over the course of 9 months in 2009, I conducted extensive interviews with unionists from both ATE and UPCN in their workplaces and the union offices, attended plenaries, assemblies (at the level of the sectional office and at the workplace), and other meetings, attended classes for new delegates run by both organizations, and attended demonstrations, press conferences, and other public events associated with union activity. My main informants were union leaders, from union delegates at the level of the administrative unit (e.g., government department) to those with positions in the central offices of the sections pertaining to the city of Buenos Aires. Since I did not conduct fieldwork with ordinary affiliates or employees not affiliated to the unions, the focus of this article is very much on the political work of union activism as well as state employment as work.

Formal and Informal Work

It is not common to compare Bolivia with Argentina. It is far more common to compare Argentina with, say, Brazil, Mexico, or Chile and to compare Bolivia with Guatemala, and, lately, Venezuela. There are considerable disparities in wealth, dominant cultural background, and structure of the two economies. The differences might be characterized crudely in terms of relative development, or alternatively, along another axis of comparison that became increasingly important as my fieldwork progressed, namely the distinction between formal and informal economies. That is, we might say – again, I stress crudely – that Argentina has a more formal economy than Bolivia (in other words, a larger formal sector within its economy relative to the informal sector). The informal-formal distinction becomes even starker when I reiterate the fact that while I worked with street vendors in Bolivia, I worked with public sector workers in Argentina. Here, the phrase “public sector workers” covers a wide range of occupations – civil servants in ministries and municipal departments, also hospital workers (including nurses but not doctors), lab workers, technicians and artists employed by state-run theaters, academics, and some educational workers (although not teachers). However, some caution is important here: one World Bank report estimates the percentage of the economically active population (EAP) working in the informal sector of the Bolivian economy at 55 percent in 2002 (Arias and Bendini 2006), whereas in Argentina, an estimate of employment in the informal sector puts it at 39 percent of the EAP in 2009. Some other more impressionistic estimates put the proportion of informal sector workers in Bolivia closer to 70 percent (Achtenberg 2011).

There is an extensive body of literature about the difficulties of defining and separating out the “informal” sector of the economy since Keith Hart’s (1973) Hart’s seminal article first outlined the concept (e.g., Peattie 1987). I certainly do not wish to fall into the quite common and oft-criticized trap of making a clear distinction between the two without recognizing the fact that the one relies absolutely upon the other to function. Nor do I wish to imply that the two categories can be placed along a continuum of development, such that more mature economies have undergone a progression from informal to formal, or have a larger formal sector that seeks eventually to incorporate the informal sector, or, to use an Argentine term, “whiten” it (blanquearlo). Nevertheless, even with all its problems as a conceptual category, the binary formal-informal has resisted deconstruction remarkably well and retains salience in everyday usage. I would also argue that it is a productive heuristic tool. What I do not wish to suggest is that the binary should be taken as a fixed dichotomy that can say something factual about a given economy and that creates boundaries between two clearly identifiable sectors. From an outside analytical perspective, we might instead wish to speak of “formalization and informalization” or “degrees of (in)formality” with regard to a spectrum of economic activity. Both these conceptualizations, however, require some notion of a binary of formal and informal, a distinction that, I argue, enables us to productively analyze the nature of work in these two spaces. The important point for this article is the fact that the comparison between the two contexts does not in practice fall entirelycomfortably along the most immediately obvious lines, namely of formal sector workers in Buenos Aires versus informal sector workers in El Alto.

That said, few would deny that street vendors everywhere, including in El Alto, are classically informal sector workers: they do not pay taxes; they have no benefits such as pension allowance, sick pay, holidays, etc.; they are often even breaking the law by selling in some places. Public sector workers in Argentina have pension benefits, health insurance, holiday, and sick pay, etc., and “labor stability” (estabilidad laboral) protected by the constitution. This latter is in stark contrast to the situation of not only street vendors but also public sector workers in Bolivia, where a job in a state entity is usually reliant upon prior political militancy, particularly during the elec-
nation campaign (known as *aval político*) for the political party of the chief political appointee (the minister, mayor, prefect, etc.). When that person resigns or is voted out of office, “their people” follow, often at the expense of several months’ unpaid salary. A change of political regime leads to a wholesale change of personnel – even the porter of a neighborhood school can be a political appointment, as I was told at the time of the 1999 elections in El Alto.

Yet that very fact does mean that a fair number of the people I worked with at the Federation of Street Vendors in El Alto had been public sector workers prior to working as street traders. Others had come to street vending from different routes, mostly from being peasants, often involved in peasant union activism, and some had previously worked in the mines and miners’ unions. However, for the public sector workers in particular, losing their jobs when their party lost office, as what happened in 1999, meant that a number of people turned to selling on the streets. Subsequently, their administrative abilities and probably also their taste for political jobs directed them to union leadership. So some of the most effective and committed trade unionists used the skills they developed when they worked in public administration for the benefit of their affiliates to help solve bureaucratic and political problems. Thus, not all the street vendor unionists of El Alto are as different from public sector unionists in Buenos Aires as one might at first imagine.

Furthermore, public sector work in Argentina is not quite as formal as the previous paragraphs imply. The 1990s saw a proliferation of different categories of temporarily contracted state workers; there was a freeze in the recruitment of permanent staff as part of the neoliberal turn to the “smaller state” at that time.4 There is now a wealth of forms of contracted work in the state, at varying levels of “precariousness” (*precariedad*), to use ATE’s term. At the more precarious end is the contract for provision of services (*locación de servicios*), where the worker has the fiscal category of self-employed (*monotributista*) and where contracts usually last for a year but can be for 6 months, 3 months, or even 1 month; at the other end of the spectrum is the category of the *planta transitoria*, which denotes a regimen where workers have almost all of the labor rights of permanent workers (known as the *planta permanente*) minus stability.

The Formal-Informal Boundary as an Object of Political Work

Initially, neither ATE nor UPCN leadership felt that they had much in common with those workers brought in under temporary contracts as most of them were perceived to be political appointments at high levels: policy advisors intimately connected with the government of the time, and often paid very well in comparison with standard civil servants.5 But as time went on, and the numbers of permanent staff were reduced through retirement and other forms of attrition, more workers were hired under temporary contracts to perform tasks equivalent to those undertaken by permanent workers, and more temporary workers had their contracts repeatedly renewed. Now, a significant proportion of state employees are on temporary contracts and many have been so for upwards of 6 years. This has meant that gradually, the issue of contracted workers became a union question, most overtly for ATE. Therefore, an issue that might at first glance be a descriptive one – how to describe different forms of employment – has become a political one, and the complex nature of formal and informal distinctions within state employment shape important aspects of the political work of activists from both trade unions. “Work” here appears in two senses: work as employment with a set of conditions that can be described and evaluated and as political work, the work of activism.

ATE was the first major union in the public sector that could affiliate contracted workers, and that fact is one of the main reasons that people gave me for affiliating to ATE. More generally, the question of contracted workers was almost self-defining for ATE delegates: when people recounted their experiences with ATE to me, a recurrent theme was the defense of contracted workers whose contracts had not been renewed; in discussions at meetings and in interviews with ATE delegates to the central Equal Opportunities Commission and its subdelegations, the question of whether the commission could hear complaints from contracted workers about workplace violence took center stage. When I asked ATE leaders and delegates what were the principal issues for public sector workers in their department, almost all spoke of the issue of contracted workers as either the most important question or the second most important, after that of salary. They perceived the defense of contract workers to mean the formalization of their work situation and argued for the move of all workers to permanent contracts as a constitutional necessity.

In contrast, when I asked UPCN delegates and leaders about the preoccupations of their workers, they tended to speak of salary first, followed by working conditions, and then more personal questions. While ATE has in many ways positioned itself as the only union that will defend contracted workers, UPCN defines itself differently, as the union that embodies the *convenio colectivo de trabajo* – the agreement that results from collective bargaining between employer and unions. Contracted workers only gain recognition in the collective agreement if they are part of the *planta transitoria* as defined by their employer; and UPCN does not affiliate workers contracted under the regime of provision of services.
This is not to say that UPCN has not worked to improve the situation of contracted workers, in both official and unofficial ways. Officially, the latest round of collective negotiation in the meetings between employers and unions resulted in an agreement with the state (as employer) to move more workers from temporary contracts to permanent ones; and the secretary general of the UPCN delegation at Administración Nacional de la Seguridad Social – National Administration of Social Security (ANSES; the social security agency) spoke proudly of a pilot scheme in his organization that resulted in the moving of 3,600 employees to permanent contracts and that would be extended to the rest of the national public administration, according to him. Just before I left, one of the most important leaders of UPCN told me that UPCN was preparing an announcement that it had negotiated the move of all contracted workers to permanent status. Less officially, some ATE delegates accused UPCN delegates of organizing the move of workers from provision of service contracts to the planta transitoria category in return for affiliation.

The relationship between these different categories of workers does not map unproblematically to a distinction between formal and informal employment. Legally, the situation is complex as any temporary contract contradicts the constitutional provision of labor stability for state workers. However, the Public Employment Law provides for temporary contracts with full labor rights apart from stability; and in 2002, one set of temporary contracts was legalized by decree on the same basis, and many state workers therefore moved to this more regular but still not fully stable form of contract. ATE’s lawyers argued in a deposition to the supreme court in mid-2009, however, that all temporary contracts are illegal because they contravene the constitutional provision of labor stability in state employment. So a fairly radical position would be to say that any contract that does not constitute permanent employment is informal because it is illegal, and we might then propose that the distinction stable-precarious is the one that most closely maps to that of formal-informal. However, in practice, there are degrees of informality, and things are more ambiguous since the precarious contracts, while perhaps unconstitutional, have still been (quasi) legalized by government decree and legislation. Admittedly, ATE’s leaflets at demonstrations declare “Enough of precarious work,” not “Enough of informal work” (“Basta de precarización laboral,” not “basta de informalidad laboral”).

But ATE delegates frequently blur the distinction between precariousness and informality; this can be seen in their use of the distinction between “white” and “black” when applied to work in the public sector:

There are employment contracts that have one part “in the white” and one part “in the black,” but beyond that there are whole employment contracts that are “in the black.” For example, I used to work in another institution (within this Ministry but in another institution) where until 2005 the contracts were all “in the black” – 100%, because they were based on a decree that permitted the contracting of occasional workers in order to do occasional jobs. That’s to say, that if they needed a lawyer, an accountant, an administrator, they called that person for a specific task, and then they had to go home, that was the spirit of the decree. In reality, this was not fulfilled, and they made these people work on a daily basis, fulfilling the functions, timetable and everything [of a permanent worker] with a contract that wasn’t for that. I’m a worker “in the black” and if I’m not “in the black,” then I’m very, very dark grey! [laughs] If you don’t want to say worker “in the black,” then what are you? You don’t have a Christmas bonus, you don’t have vacations, you don’t have anything.

The latter quote also speaks to something that is recognized by ATE’s lawyers too, namely grades of violation of the principle of stability. In this continuum, the contracts of provision of services are perceived as the worst in terms of labor rights, the most “black,” but others, such as temporary contracts, contracts of internships, and so on, are “grayer.” Another phrase commonly used to refer to these contracts is “garbage contracts” (contratos de basura), the use of which makes an equivalence between these contracts in state employment and highly precarious ones in the private sector. However, it took me a while to realize that the phrase “garbage contracts” actually referred to these particular types of contracts because in many contexts, people used it rhetorically to refer to any temporary contract, even one with labor rights.

The element of the “informal” or “black” also comes in to public sector work when people talk of part of their salary being paid “in the black” (en negro). What they mean by this is that a significant portion of their monthly salary is paid in the form of “pluses” – incentive schemes or contributions to specified costs – accumulated over the years. Such payments are not taken into account when their salary is measured for the purposes of calculating their retirement pension as a percentage of their final salary. This is a serious problem in an inflationary economy.

In many ways, the different approaches of the two unions to the question of temporarily contracted workers sum up the two different approaches that they take on many other issues, or, put differently, the different ways that the activists from both unions understand unionism as a kind of political work.
UPCN focuses mostly on the negotiation of improvement in the situation of contracted workers through the collective agreement and schemes such as the ANSES one. ATE sees itself as “defending” contracted workers by demonstrating when they “are fired” (i.e., their contracts not renewed), or moved to a different job, by demonstrating more generally against precarious work and by a legal strategy of questioning the constitutionality of such contracts in the first place. For ATE, the affiliation and defense of contracted workers is central to their self-definition as a union; for UPCN, contracted workers are more difficult to incorporate structurally unless they are moved to more stable jobs.

The Desire to Formalize?

For the purposes of this article, though, I would like to point to a similarity: both unions want to move as many workers as possible from the planta transitoria and other forms of temporary contract to permanent ones. We can see this desire as a desire to move people from the informal (broadly defined) closer to the formal part of the employment spectrum. It chimes with the stated policy of the current government to “whiten” more workers and reduce the informal sector (and of course in the process collect more taxation revenue). Evidence for this can be found in, for example, a television advertisement for the national tax agency, Administración Federal de Ingresos Públicos, Federal Administration of Public Revenue (AFIP) that depicts an employer proudly telling his employees that he has made their houses and businesses legal, in his influential book The Other Path (1989). For the street vendors themselves, complete formality would mean greater taxation – by the municipal authorities if not the national government – and they strongly resisted it. They remained content to pay the very small daily rent for their stalls (around US$0.02–.15 in 2003) to the municipality but resisted any other form of formality as taxation. They continue to do so, although they are very concerned to gain two other kinds of formality, namely the municipal order to recognize their right to sell in a particular location, and the legal personhood for their association, because both may help them avoid harassment by the local authorities. For their interlocutors in the local government, the unions of street vendors and market women are the legitimate and proper partners in regulation of commerce in El Alto despite their “informality.”

This was illustrated during a conflict in 2003 between rival associations of fish sellers over the potential building of a terminal for the wholesale of fish in El Alto for which the leader of one association had gained funds from the Spanish Embassy. The conflict was mainly over the eventual control of that terminal: which association (or union) would administer the distribution of stalls and take over the day-to-day administration. One association was composed of the fish sellers in a particular market in El Alto, while the other (whose leader had arranged the development funds, supposedly) was composed of the fishermen and women of the area around Lake Titicaca. Both associations operated in informal commerce, and one even lacked full legal permission to sell its produce on its normal site and had been displaced from its regular location by the state at least three times over the course of two decades. In fact, there was considerable overlap between the organizations, but the focus of one was the city of El Alto, while the other was the lake area; the Federation of Street Vendors proposed that control of the terminal should properly be in the hands of the association based in the city itself. For the state officials involved, who also divided in their support based upon whether they were from the city government or the prefecture, legally speaking, the conflict between the two associations was about the freedom of trade. Some of the civil servants involved argued that if either side was to control a fish terminal, and charge potentially extortionate fees to prospective affiliates, it would be infringing the free trade provisions of Decree 21060. However, they did not consider that the existence of a union controlling access to the terminal might make trade unfree or that...
it was more properly the role of the state to control access. They were more than ready to negotiate with representatives of the producers and wholesale/distributors of fish, and some were prepared to support the claims of one association over another.

Thus, the Bolivian state reinforced the necessity of collective organization because its agents (the municipal and prefecture civil servants involved in this particular conflict) cannot negotiate directly with the household-based units of production that characterize the economy of El Alto today. Trade unions and the state are thus interdependent, and the state relies upon unions to do regulatory work in its stead (Cross 1998). On the other hand, trade unions also seek to defend their members against the measures of a sometimes predatory government when they consider that it is attempting to overregulate (Clark 1988). As Joe Foweraker (1990) has pointed out, the unions’ ability to solve practical problems for their members usually requires some sort of negotiation with the state; but also the state needs to call on unions to help it regulate the economy. In Bolivia, state actors will not (or cannot) negotiate with individuals, thus collective organizations become necessary as counterparts, even when they operate at the edges of legality in the informal economy. From the perspective of both the trade unions and the state, consciously keeping the lines between formality and informality blurred is more conducive to solving political problems, especially through acting as though informal associations were, to all intents and purposes, formal.

My point here is to highlight how different actors create a relationship between the two broad spheres of formal and informal, and the ability and/or desire to draw lines between the two and to draw subjects from one side of the line to the other. This analysis is inspired by Timothy Mitchell’s argument about the distinction between state and society (Mitchell 1991), where he makes the point that objectively, the distinction state society does not stand up to close scrutiny, as the one part of the equation is entirely imbricated in and dependent upon the other. But what is important is the way that people make the distinction, the situations in which they seek to put a boundary around “the state” or “society” to differentiate the one from the other. Much the same could be said for the distinction between formal and informal (or work “in the white” and “in the black”: trabajo en blanco and trabajo en negro), which constantly changes according to different political imperatives. These different boundary-making activities are enactments of agency by the activists as they seek to improve their lot in response to state policies and more structural conditions such as the neoliberalization of the economy.

The distinction between formal and informal from the perspective of an outside analyst has further salience given the recent history of trade unions in both countries, a history intimately linked to the developments in economic policy over recent decades. In Bolivia, the (formal sector) miners’ unions were traditionally at the heart of the Central Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Workers’ Central COB), the key labor movement actor during the mid-late 20th century. However, they were severely weakened as a result of the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s when around 20,000 miners were fired and “relocalized” to coca-growing areas or the migrant city of El Alto. As a result, the peasants have reemerged as key political actors in recent years – as coca growers, as highland peasants in the peasants’ confederation, and as residents of El Alto (Lazar 2008). Thus, in the Bolivian case, the newly prominent workers are very much informal sector workers, to the point even of being mostly illegal, as is the case for the coca growers in the Chapare region, out of whose ranks rose Evo Morales, the current president. Thus, the spaces for effective political agency for trade unions have been shaped by an economy that has seen significant deformalization in the last 30 years, and it has been particular groups of informal workers that have managed to take advantage of this.

In contrast, although Argentina experienced a rapid growth in informality in the 1990s and especially around 2001 to 2003 – when formal sector employment dipped to 36 percent, with informal sector employment counting for 42 percent of the EAP (Tornarolli and Conconi 2007) – many trade unions have retained their classic orientation and directed their efforts at organizing formal workers.13 This does not mean, however, that (fully) informal workers completely lack spaces to enact their political agency. New initiatives have arisen that explicitly identify themselves as combating this perceived problem, one of which is the CTA, which directly affiliates all workers, defined as those who are registered, unregistered, and without work. The last decade also saw newer political actors rising to prominence who are completely outside of the formal sector, such as the piqueteros, the organizations of unemployed workers. Even within the ambit of the CGT, a shift in power has occurred away from the trade unions that represent industrial workers to the truck drivers, workers in commerce, and the civil servants.

The decline in power of the classic formal sector industrial unions is a global trend, resulting from the shift of economies from manufacturing to services, commerce, communications, and education (Silver 2003). How this global process has played out in different countries has resulted in different collective actors having political (and economic) power, and this in turn has implications for how their members...
experience their citizenship, understood as political agency (see Lazar 2008). For example, a public sector worker or truck driver in Argentina has more opportunities to actualize his or her citizenship through membership of a politically powerful trade union than a factory worker in a small enterprise in the private sector does, whether formally registered or not. Factory workers may actualize their citizenship in a different way – through a territorial organization, membership of the Peronist political party, or individually, but the trade union form is less available to them.

However, since the mid-20th century, hegemonic Argentine citizenship formations have been very closely linked to formal work. This is especially evident with respect to social rights, which were granted on the model of the male breadwinner in a registered job (Grassi 2003). Social insurance schemes such as pensions and health insurance were made available progressively to different categories of workers from the mid-20th century onwards (Usami 2004). Those schemes were run by the trade unions, a position they vigorously defended at the time and continue to do so today. Informal workers (including reproductive laborers in household settings, whether as unpaid family members or paid domestic employees) have historically had little to no access to pensions or other benefits, and their access to health services is limited to the provision in public hospitals. Most of the trade unions have resisted attempts to universalize social rights as encapsulated in benefits (Lopez Levy n.d.), not least because such attempts also look similar to efforts to reduce union power as in the case of reductions in the control that unions exercised over pension funds and health insurance schemes in the 1990s (Usami 2004). Political rights have also been very closely associated with formal sector trade unions: since the first regime of Juan Perón (minister for labor from 1943 to 1946, president from 1946 to 1955), political participation of nonelite men and their families, where it has occurred, has been articulated principally through the organized labor movement (James 1988). These structural conditions have meant that it has historically been in the unions’ interest to maintain the boundary between formal and informal and the consequent connection between formal sector employment and citizenship as mediated through the trade union. As we have seen, though, while the boundary itself is important, the unions also want to move as many workers as possible from one side to the other. Thus, the boundary maintenance is a mixture of exclusive and inclusive processes: exclusive in that unions rarely seek to gain benefits for a wide range of workers (or the popular classes) but inclusive in that they seek to move as many people as possible to (more) formal employment.

Formality-Informality and Citizenship

This discussion of some aspects of work, including political work, for state employees in Buenos Aires and street vendors in El Alto leads me to propose that – although the thrust of much of the academic literature breaks down the division between formal and informal – the distinction itself retains purchase in everyday life. I suggest that it is a useful heuristic tool, as long as one is careful not to reify the binary as a dichotomy during the course of analysis. I hope to have shown that we can retain a notion of the difference between formal and informal work while accepting that any particular work context will have both formal and informal elements to it. A notion of “degrees of informality” might help but not if we approach economic activity as a linear continuum that runs from informal to formal. Real-life situations are too fluid to characterize them as more or less informal in any stable or structural kind of way. Nonetheless, we can identify aspects of formality and informality in most work contexts. More importantly, for some groups of people the distinction between the two matters, not least as an object of political work.

The comparison between street traders in El Alto and public sector workers in Buenos Aires is on the surface a distinction between the informal and formal sectors of the two economies respectively. However, I then blurred the lines between the two, particularly in the case of the public sector workers of Buenos Aires, where informality in the form of precariousness, or work “in the black” is very common, but also in the case of street traders in El Alto, some of whom – particularly those in leadership positions – have been public sector workers themselves. Finally, I reinstated the difference between the two contexts, when I argued that although it is not as clear-cut a distinction between formal and informal as one might expect at first sight, there is a difference in how the actors deal with informality.

For the El Alto street traders, informality is not a problem; indeed, greater formality would be more of a problem because they may then have to pay more taxes. Similarly, the Bolivian state at different levels does not really seek to formalize street vending: the city government of El Alto expects the trade unions to organize and regulate commerce in the city and has no problem with treating informal sector workers as interlocutors in this. The national government gave up on any idea of formalizing those vendors with small amounts of capital, in the sense of enforcing taxation in the mid-late 1990s, and this is a position that subsequent governments have maintained.

In contrast, for the public sector workers of Buenos Aires, informality as understood in their sector is a problem. Both ATE and UPCN share the desire to formalize, as does the Fernández de Kirchner
government, as can be seen in the campaigns of “whitening” in both the public and private sector. There are of course many reasons for these differences, especially the relatively recent and relatively sharp increase in size of the informal sector in Argentina since the 1990s, and the subsequent revival of the formal sector of the economy and formal sector trade unions since 2003. However, it is also important to consider the historical significance of formal work for understandings of Argentine citizenship and the ways that shape the possibilities for political agency. Neither ATE nor UPCN wants to undermine the boundary between formal and informal work; what they want is to draw more people to the formal side of that division. This in turn reduces the potential for union-led mobilization within the informal sector itself in contrast to the situation in Bolivia.

In turn, this use of the formal-informal heuristic leads me to a final, albeit tentative, proposition with respect to one aspect of citizenship in the two spaces, and that comes down to a difference in explicit expectations of and desire for legality and formality. Here, understandings of work come to stand for understandings also of citizenship, the state, and even democracy. Argentines tended to view their state as more formal and more functional than the Bolivians did. In Argentina, this is part of a self-image as one of the more “European,” or “developed,” countries in South America. In practice, tramites (bureaucratic tasks) are actually done in multiple ways in Argentina, and some gentle pushing will often expose condemnation of corrupt practices (tramites especiales). But condemnation of corruption was not such a dominant trope of talk about politics in middle-class Buenos Aires in 2009 as it was in El Alto and middle-class and wealthy areas of La Paz in Bolivia in 1999 to 2004. Both UPCN and ATE appealed frequently to the law – in the shape of the constitution or the collective agreement legislation – and both desired legality and formality. They explicitly fought for rational, efficient, and professional bureaucratic practice and office holding (the Weberian ideal) even when they subverted it in their real-life activities. In intellectual debates on citizenship in Argentina, citizenship is mostly viewed as a normative ideal that must be achieved, a measure against which contemporary society is found wanting – not along the lines of exclusion and inclusion in which Bolivian intellectuals debate but because Argentina is seen as not quite measuring up to the Liberal representative democracies of Europe. This was brought into sharp and painful relief by the extreme nature of the 1976–1983 dictatorship and became of enormous importance in the transition to democracy, a democracy that is still understood as frail and new 25 years later. I read these debates about citizenship and the question of formality and formality as part of the same broad set of values – which have to do with the desire for a particular kind of state, one that functions in a knowable way. As such, a comparative anthropology of work and citizenship becomes a way to begin to think through the anthropology of the state and democracy.

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Notes

1 Elsewhere, I discuss some of the issues of comparing these two seemingly incommensurable groups of research subjects, a process I call “disjunctive comparison,” and argue that it is extremely important to, if not constitutive of, social anthropology more generally (Lazar forthcoming).


3 Similarly, discussing the precise variables that would enable strong definitions of formal and informal in Bolivia and Argentina is beyond the scope of this article. I mean to refer more to an intuitive understanding of formal economic activity as involving (usually) stable work regulated by means of contracts enforced, ultimately, by the state – state regulation as collection of taxation, the provision of entitlements such as sick pay, holiday pay, pension, and so on. That intuitive understanding derives from my interpretation of my informants’ desire (or lack of desire) for greater state regulation or stability in their work. Many of the previous variables would not pertain in my own economy, that of the United Kingdom, which is nonetheless usually perceived as largely formalized. That said, even
in the United Kingdom, we can speak of a degree of neoliberal informalization, associated with subcontracting, temporary employment, and so on (Standing 1989).

4 The scare quotes here are important: in many countries across the world (including Bolivia and Argentina), the neoliberal turn to “smaller government” did not mean a reduction in the state itself. While many state-run enterprises were privatized, government subsidies to private companies remained high; formal state employees were moved “off the books” to temporary contracts, or to the subsidized private enterprises, and levels of military and policing expenditure, as well as repressive activity, remained high (Gill 2000).

5 Nicolas Diana, personal communication (June 29, 2009).


7 “Hay contratos laborales que tienen una parte en blanco y una parte en negro, pero además hay contratos laborales que son todo en negro. Yo, por ejemplo, trabajaba en otro organismo, dentro de este Ministerio pero en otro organismo, en donde los contratos hasta el año 2005, fueron todos en negro. El 100 percent eran en negro . . . porque se fundaban en un decreto . . . que permitía la contratación de trabajadores eventuales, para hacer trabajos eventuales. Es decir, si necesitaban un abogado, un contador, un administrativo, lo llamaban para determinada cosa y después se tenía que ir a su casa, ese era el espíritu del decreto. En realidad, no se cumplían y hacían trabajar a las personas . . . cotidianamente cumpliendo las funciones, el horario y todo, con un contrato que no era para eso.”

8 “Yo soy un trabajador en negro y si no soy en negro, soy gris oscurísimo (laughs). Si no querés decir trabajador en negro, ¿qué sos?, no tenés aguinaldo, no tenés vacaciones, no . . . tenés nada.”


11 In 1986, Ley 843 came into force and drastically simplified Bolivia’s taxation regime, in line with the structural adjustment policy of the time, and was modified in 1994 to take into account the Popular Participation Law and Capitalization processes. By the late 1990s, the Bolivian taxation system meant that sales taxation, in the form of registration under the Regimen Tributario Simplificado (RTS, initially expected to be a transitional category), was, in theory, required for all “comerciantes minoristas,” including street vendors. According to the law, they were supposed to register under the RTS and pay bimonthly amounts of taxation, which increased according to the amount of capital they held. In 1997, the lower amount at which that came into force was set by presidential decree at 2,001Bs (about US$400 at the time). Source: Guía del Contribuyente 2000 pamphlet published by Servicio de Impuestos, Bolivia. According to my informants, that represented a significant rise in the amount of capital that made a street vendor legally liable for taxation: one capacity-building workshop facilitator for a microcredit group put the previous amount at 1,000Bs.

12 As indicated by the title, this neoliberal manifesto offered an alternative to the revolutionary Maoist “Shining Path” (Sendero Luminoso) movement that was active during that tumultuous period in Peru.

13 Figures for 2002: 36 percent of EAP in formal employment, 42 percent in informal employment, 18 percent unemployed. Note: Tornaroli and Conconi elaborated these figures based upon the Encuesta Permanente de Hogares conducted by INDEC; I converted the figures into percent of EAP.

References


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