
Katherine Sobering
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Working for Justice in Argentina

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In memory of Don, Fred, Arminda, Horacio, and Luisita

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Parisians would not have stormed the Bastille, Gandhi would not have challenged the empire on which the sun used not to set, Martin Luther King would not have fought white supremacy in the "land of the free . . . ," without their sense of manifest injustices that could be overcome.
—AMARTYA SEN, *The Idea of Justice*

Introduction

In 1919 Conrad Hilton used his life savings to buy a hotel in the small town of Cisco, Texas. At the height of an oil boom, he turned a quick profit and kept buying hotels, establishing what would become the international brand of Hilton Hotels. Hilton's story is a classic entrepreneurial tale: Through hard work, smart decisions, and a bit of luck, a plucky veteran of the Great War turned a humble Texas hotel into a global hospitality corporation. This narrative is seeded with assumptions about how businesses in capitalist economies begin and grow: A boss starts and owns the company, makes decisions unilaterally, and expands to turn an even bigger profit. But there is more than one way to run a business. Some are owned collectively, run democratically,

and driven not only to make money but also to advance social values. Yet as you walk along, peeking into shops or hurrying past storefronts, you're unlikely to notice all these different organizational possibilities. That's just not how we think about business.

Now let's imagine you're walking around the densely populated capital city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. An eclectic mix of homes, businesses, schools, and offices line the sidewalks, punctuated by busy bus stops and subway entrances. At the intersection of Corrientes and Callao (pronounced *ca-jao*) Avenues, you stand within blocks of major national landmarks: Argentina's Congress, the tall white obelisk marking the city's four hundredth year, and the nation's Supreme Court, to name a few. Turning off Corrientes, known as "the street that never sleeps," you pass a restaurant window temptingly arrayed with rows of fresh empanadas, a newspaper stand, and an English language school before approaching a street-side café. The windows of the modest Utopia Café are usually covered in seasonally themed decals—pastel flowers in spring, turning leaves in fall—that welcome guests as they step in from the busy street for a cup of coffee and buttery croissants called *medialunas*. What is not immediately evident is that the Utopia Café, with the adjoining Hotel Bauen, is run exclusively by its workers, who make decisions democratically, share tasks and rotate jobs, and pay members equally (see figure Intro.1). Here in Argentina hundreds of companies have adopted a different way of organizing work that centers on democracy, equality, and social needs over expansion and profit. Conrad Hilton presumably would be appalled.

While many people accept Hilton's approach to business as legitimate and even desirable, sociologists who study inequality are concerned with the consequences of such practices. In research on everything from workplaces and neighborhoods to families and schools, sociologists ask: How do inequalities manifest in everyday life? And what are the causes and consequences of unequal conditions? Understanding how inequality operates, who it affects, and why it persists is critically important. It does not, however, shed much light on how we might promote a more just society.[1] In writing this book, I set out to ask a different set of questions: How can we produce and sustain equality? How might organizations broadly distribute opportunities and resources? Why are some businesses motivated to do this? And what challenges do they confront in the process?

Equality is widely agreed upon as worthy—at least in theory. From revolutions of the past to social movements of the present, calls for democracy, justice, and equality can be heard ringing from the halls of government to

Intro.1 Entrance to the Utopia Café. Photo by BAUEN Cooperative.

protests in the streets. But there is little consensus on what equality means in practice. In sociology, scholars often use the term *equality* to refer to an ideal or as a synonym for the reduction of inequality. This is an oversimplification. In a field that embraces *inequality* research as core to its disciplinary endeavors, sociologists need to be every bit as attentive to our understanding of *equality* and its effects. Equality, I argue, is not only an important ideal but is a central sociological concept in its own right. In this chapter I introduce the concept of an equality project to bridge abstract debates about equality in principle with the need for empirical studies of equality in practice.

When Work Disappears

In 2002 the entrance to the Hotel Bauen was boarded up, covered in graffiti, and plastered with political propaganda (see figure Intro.2). The year prior, Argentina had experienced one of the worst economic crises in its history. After a decade of rising unemployment and worsening poverty—much of it caused by policy changes that sharply devalued the Argentine peso—investors were skittish and ready to pull their money out of the country. So, in a dramatic turn of events, the government froze all bank accounts.

Intro.2 Entrance to the Hotel Bauen after it closed in 2001. Source unknown.

Foreign investors were stymied, but so were regular Argentines, now locked out of their savings. Thousands of outraged people took to the streets, banging pots and pans and chanting, "¡Que se vayan todos!" (Out with them all!). Amid these social mobilizations, the private owners of the Hotel Bauen quietly closed their doors and fired the remaining seventy employees.

Gisela was in her early sixties when she was fired from the Hotel Bauen in 2001. "It was an aberration," she said. "I still get emotional when I remember it. It was the saddest thing. . . . I had been there for twenty years, and [they knew] I didn't have [another] job, that they weren't going to pay a single peso. Imagine how you would feel?"[2]

On her last day at work, Gisela collected uniforms from her fellow employees. A seamstress by trade, she explained, "I was [working] with the linens, we distributed uniforms. . . . They had to turn in all their uniforms before they left, and each person came and said goodbye to me . . . crying bitterly." At the end of the day, Gisela remembered, "they gave me cardboard boxes and told me to put all the uniforms in them. . . . I left everything organized in my sector and locked up."

Towering twenty stories over the streets of Buenos Aires, the Hotel Bauen was once a symbol of luxury (see figure Intro.3). Gisela vividly remembered its glitzy 1978 opening: "Impressive, impressive. I started a month before [it opened]. It was a five-star hotel, but really five stars because it . . . opened when the World Cup was here in Argentina." From the elegant lobby, affluent guests could descend a spiral staircase to an underground nightclub where the walls were tiled with small mirrors that made the whole room look like a disco ball. Or they could take a glass elevator from the ground floor to the second-story bar and restaurant, finding some privacy in its intimate

Intro.3 An aerial view of the Hotel Bauen. Photo by Martin Barzilai/Sub Cooperative.

booths shrouded in heavy curtains. Overnight guests enjoyed downtown views from the twenty-story tower and access to a deck and pool that felt like an oasis amid the bustle of urban life.

A single mother of three, Gisela had worked in a perfume shop before learning about the job openings at the Hotel Bauen. She explained, "I had the opportunity to come to this hotel where I could dedicate myself exclusively to making things, and I really liked it . . . the production of curtains, pillowcases, tablecloths, everything related to hotels. It was 1978, the year that [the hotel] opened." Gisela, like many others, knew the history of the Hotel Bauen well. It had been financed with public loans granted by a US-backed military dictatorship, which took power on the pretext of controlling communism.[3] Gisela recalled, "It was the era of the military and the repression, a time when they killed a lot of people . . . but [the hotel] was really nice, a luxury organization. . . . We didn't realize what was happening outside."

It must have been quite a contrast, this constructed facade of luxury juxtaposed against the brutal reality taking place in the streets. Human rights organizations estimate that thirty thousand people were disappeared—kidnapped, tortured, and murdered—by the state during the five-year military dictatorship. After the country returned to democracy in 1983, Gisela said,

she gradually became more aware of what had happened: "The girls and boys who were involved in politics, they were the people they [the military] disappeared during that time." But even then, Gisela admitted, "I was never political. I never organized with any [political] party, I was more of a worker." Gisela's understanding of her work as a seamstress as outside of politics would change dramatically in the years to follow.

When Gisela lost her job in 2001, she decided to retire early. But she soon made a startling discovery about her longtime employer: "When I started to do the paperwork to retire, [I realized] they had not contributed to my retirement. . . . They kept the money [even though] they deducted my contribution." As Gisela sought to resolve her retirement situation, she was in contact with other former coworkers negotiating with the bankruptcy judge in charge of the hotel's case to receive the unpaid wages they were owed. When talks stalled, former Bauen employees looked for other options. It became clear to many that losing their jobs was not an individual failure but a by-product of a greedy employer and a neoliberal political and economic crisis.

Unemployment can be an isolating experience. When work disappears, as William Julius Wilson (1996) puts it, people often feel alone and defeated as life becomes disorganized in the absence of steady jobs. But a very different series of events took place in Argentina. As unemployment rates rose, social movements blossomed all around the country.[4] Residents formed neighborhood assemblies to organize basic services. Unemployed workers known as *piqueteros* blocked streets to demand jobs and social services.[5] And, responding to the wave of bankruptcies, former employees illegally entered and occupied businesses, forming what are called *worker-recuperated businesses* to fight for their rights and revive their source of work.

That's just what organizers from the National Movement of Recuperated Businesses (MNER) suggested to former Bauen employees who reached out to them in 2002: *illegally enter and occupy the shuttered hotel to demand the money they were owed*.[6] Gisela remembered the initial conversations among her former coworkers that took place during visits to occupied factories across the city of Buenos Aires: "I went to the first meeting [when] they started to say that we were going to take the hotel. . . . At that time there were a bunch of recuperated businesses, but the most important thing was that this was not a small hotel or a hotel in the background or in the province. It was in the middle of downtown. It was a really important thing to take it."

In these meetings Gisela saw her former coworkers for the first time in months. She was struck by the hardships they faced: "They didn't have milk to bring home, they couldn't find any work . . . so they couldn't eat. They

didn't have any other alternative. . . . This was the only way that they [the owners] would pay their debt to us: to go and plant ourselves inside the hotel until they paid us." After consulting with her family, she decided to join the group. Using a term more typically applied to social movement coparticipants than coworkers, Gisela described her choice: "I decided with a lot of determination, even though I was sixty or so years old. I still feel strong. I still say I'm going to fight for my compañeros."[7]

On March 21, 2003, over a year after the hotel closed, Gisela arrived at the corner of Callao and Corrientes. She trembled as she waited for the others—former coworkers, MNER organizers, workers from other recuperated businesses, students, and neighbors. Gisela knew the Hotel Bauen like the back of her hand, so when the group decided to enter through an underground parking garage, she and a small cadre of women led the way. If they were stopped by the police, they reasoned, older women would certainly garner more respect than younger men. They might even avoid police repression for their trespassing. Approaching the entrance, the group broke the lock and entered a dark underground corridor. They proceeded through the lower levels of the hotel and up the staff stairs, following the light shining in through the floor-to-ceiling windows in the lobby. "When we got there," Gisela said, the women "began to cry and hug because we never thought that we would return to the hotel." They were overwhelmed by what they'd done.

In the months that followed, the group occupied the hotel around the clock, panhandling for spare change on the street corner and sharing what little income they made from working odd jobs. After their appeals to their former employer stalled, the group started the process of forming a worker cooperative to negotiate with the judge as a collective. They decided to keep the hotel's original name but make it into an acronym. *Bauen*—a German word meaning "to construct"—became BAUEN, standing for Buenos Aires, a National Company (Buenos Aires, una Empresa Nacional).[8] It didn't take long for the group to realize there was little hope that they'd ever receive their unpaid wages. So members of the newly formed BAUEN Cooperative set their sights on a more ambitious goal: to reopen the hotel *sin patrón* (without a boss). Rather than returning to an employment relation of dependence, becoming members of a worker cooperative allowed them to share ownership of the company. In the new BAUEN, they would be "worker-owners."

In 2005 the cooperative reopened the hotel to the public and operated it continuously until the state-mandated closure in 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic. During its operation the BAUEN Cooperative succeeded in providing work for many. From 30 founding members in 2003, the BAUEN

Cooperative soon grew to over one hundred members. Their success nonetheless came with a big caveat: the cooperative never received the legal right to use the property. In a perplexing series of events, different state actors offered and then withdrew support, passed favorable laws and then vetoed them, and ultimately left the cooperative in a legal limbo for the entire time it operated the downtown hotel.

Equality Projects

Through the process of reorganizing work, members of the BAUEN Cooperative initiated what I call an *equality project*, a term that is central to understanding the story of this hotel. As mentioned, in sociology the word equality is commonly used to refer to inequality reduction.[9] If we decrease inequalities—so the logic goes—we can promote equality in society. Reducing inequalities is certainly a worthy goal (and the implicit moral project behind much social science research).[10] But equality is not simply the absence of inequality. So what exactly is equality?[11]

Equality often describes situations where people are treated interchangeably regardless of their differences.[12] Take the idea of political equality, which refers to a system in which each person by virtue of their group membership has an equal influence, may it be through a democratic vote (one person, one vote), equality before the law, or free speech. Political equality is a cornerstone of democratic republics, but it is possible in practice only if groups address social and economic differences.[13] Research on everything from voting and enfranchisement to the legal system and law enforcement attests that political equality is rarely upheld in our daily lives.

Efforts to define equality as an ideal are also closely tied to theories of distributive justice, which propose various schemes for distributing resources and opportunities in society.[14] To create a just society, do we equalize basic resources like food and shelter? Should we compensate people for situations outside their control? Or try to make up for the harms of "brute luck"?[15] Elizabeth Anderson (1999) argues that debates over how to fairly divvy up resources have lost sight of the political aim of distributive efforts: to create *relations of equality* to end oppression. Equality, Anderson argues, requires considering demands for recognition and respect as well as principles of distribution.[16]

Across these egalitarian debates, consensus about how to promote equality in practice has remained elusive.[17] As journalist Joshua Rothman (2020) observed in the *New Yorker*, "The complexities of egalitarianism are espe-

cially frustrating because inequalities are so easy to grasp. C.E.O.s, on average, make almost three hundred times what their employees make; billionaire donors shape our politics; automation favors owners over workers; urban economies grow while rural areas stagnate; the best health care goes to the richest." Rothman points out what social scientists have documented well: people and groups vary in their access to human capital, resources, and opportunities, and that variance has major consequences.[18] Just documenting that inequality is real and consequential, however, doesn't tell us how to promote equality in our families, workplaces, and economies.

Plenty of inequalities, after all, are widely considered legitimate.[19] Take the issue of CEO pay that Rothman brings up. In the United States, CEOs of public firms make 278 times the salary of a typical worker (a whopping US$17.2 million per CEO per year, on average).[20] The Occupy movement, which emerged in response to widening socioeconomic gaps following the 2008 recession, identified the disproportionate power of such superhigh incomes—the "1 percent"—and encouraged the 99 percent to recognize income inequality as a social problem.[21] Indeed, extreme wage gaps like those between CEOs and the typical workers at their firms now stir a sense of injustice. As Amartya Sen so cogently states in the epigraph of this chapter, identifying disparities as social problems is key to motivating efforts for social change. Still, very few people question the underlying principle that workers are paid differently in the first place. Managers earn more than their employees, architects more than construction workers, tenured professors more than adjuncts, and so on. We might think this is perfectly normal. But this also reveals that what constitutes equality is closely tied to our collective determinations about which inequalities are unjust.[22]

In this book, I show how equality can be fostered through social interactions and inscribed in organizations.[23] Rather than an idealized end point or distributional achievement, I argue that equality should be understood as a *project*: an effort to promote more egalitarian relations between people by revaluing the categories that orient social practice.[24] A relational understanding of the social world focuses on relationships between people, positions, and organizations and the categories that are produced therein. In their rigorous account of relational inequality theory, Donald Tomaskovic-Devey and Dustin Avent-Holt (2019) argue that inequalities become durable when categorical distinctions map onto organizational divisions of labor.[25] The resources, relations, practices, and cultural models that constitute an organization's distinctive "inequality regime" are key to explaining how inequalities

emerge and persist.[26] Equality projects turn our attention to how organizations might *question, redefine, or even dismantle* categorical distinctions in order to promote more equal interpersonal relations.

Back in Argentina, workers occupied businesses to create better jobs and more equal workplaces—in other words, to initiate equality projects. Capturing the sentiment, one worker said, "We formed the cooperative with the criteria of equal wages and making basic decisions by assembly; we are against the separation of manual and intellectual work; we want a rotation of positions and; above all, the ability to recall our elected leaders" (quoted in Lavaca Collective 2007b: 8). In the following chapters, I examine one equality project in depth, considering how workers in the BAUEN Cooperative reorganized work to promote relational equality and the dilemmas they confronted along the way. I focus on four workplace practices that change not only how work is done but also how people interact: democratic decision-making, workplace participation, job rotation, and pay equality. Through these practices workers have directly confronted categorical distinctions that are common in workplaces: power differences justified by ownership and authority; differential access to opportunities justified by skill, training, and experience; and unequal compensation justified by what types of work are valued over others.

To understand the inner workings of this equality project, I visited and worked at the Hotel Bauen on and off for nearly a decade. I washed linens alongside workers in the laundry room, answered phones at the reception desk, cleaned guest rooms with housekeepers, and observed how co-op members made decisions, organized their money, and interacted with clients, suppliers, politicians, and supporters. Through an analysis of organizational efforts to democratize decision-making, facilitate participation, rotate jobs, and equalize pay in the BAUEN Cooperative, I identify a series of organizational and cultural mechanisms that help us understand how equality is produced and sustained. *Inclusion* refers to the shifting of power dynamics that results from disrupting relations of domination based on ownership and integrating people into the value added by their efforts.[27] *Opportunity distribution* refers to the sharing of resources between members of bounded groups and those outside their network. Finally, *symbolic leveling* refers to the discursive emphasis on peoples' equivalent ability to participate in decision-making, learn new skills, and contribute value to a group (Sobering 2019a).

This book cannot provide a one-size-fits-all prescription for how to produce equality.[28] Across time and space, an organization's context and people's assessments of their circumstances vary tremendously. Any exami-

nation into how people go about creating more equal relationships requires attention to *why* they are doing so, whether they are motivated by a collective commitment to democratic participation or a sense of manifest injustice fomented by some feature of the status quo. In this sense, I use the word *project* intentionally in two ways. First, projects are the building blocks that connect what equality means in a particular context with the ways that everyday experiences are organized based on that meaning.[29] Second, the term signals the ways that we *project* into the future.[30] This notion of an equality project builds on efforts to advance democratic egalitarian goals that Erik Olin Wright (2010) calls "real utopias."[31] By combining the words *real* (something that exists) and *utopia* (a place that cannot exist), Wright purposely plays with the oxymoron to describe the dynamic interaction of hope for the future and daily social practice in actual attempts to create social institutions free from oppression. Wright's broad definition of real utopias runs the gamut from participatory governance to gender equality, though, while my notion of equality projects focuses specifically on how to facilitate more equal relations in organizations, including practices aimed at material and symbolic distribution and cultures that develop an "egalitarian ethos."[32]

How We Do Business

Let's now consider work in political terms. The institution of employment is not only undemocratic (most people have limited—if any—voice in their workplaces) but also authoritarian (most employers exercise arbitrary and unaccountable power over their workers' lives).[33] Conventional capitalist workplaces are oddly close to popular portrayals of communist dictatorships: the dictator is the boss, the organization owns all the assets, planning is centralized and hierarchical, and the ultimate punishment of exile is being fired.[34] What if work organizations were democratic instead?

Worker cooperatives partially answer this compelling question.[35] As businesses that are owned and operated by their workers, cooperatives have a long history rooted in practices of collective production, forms of mutual aid, and indigenous social organization.[36] By the Industrial Revolution, cooperatives offered an alternative to capitalist work arrangements based on a critique of the exploitation and alienation inherent to working in a relation of dependence in which workers labor under the authority of a boss. Legally and operationally, members of worker cooperatives share ownership as worker-owners, breaking the classic distinction between those roles. While specific legal classifications vary by locality, contemporary cooperatives are guided

by the shared principles of self-responsibility, democracy, equality, and solidarity.[37] Cooperatives span industries and borders, from small, relatively unstructured self-help organizations like your local food co-op to large, transnational businesses that adopt hierarchies to produce goods and services, like the famous Mondragón Corporation in Spain (comprising over 250 cooperative companies in the finance, industrial production, retail, and knowledge industries).

A dynamic and growing body of scholarship has examined cooperatives as organizational levelers.[38] Among research that has detailed the inner workings of workplace democracy, many studies have focused on the ways that organizations—even cooperatives—end up *reproducing* inequalities.[39] Indeed, as ongoing efforts, equality projects do not and cannot eradicate all inequality. Organizations are not neutral arenas in which we can identify and stamp out social problems but racialized and gendered structures that create and maintain inequalities.[40] Researchers tend to look at cooperatives in terms of whether or not they uphold purist, cooperative ideals in every aspect of doing business (Is this *really* a co-op?) rather than focusing on what they might teach us about efforts, however imperfect, to reorient social practice.[41] Worker cooperatives cannot eliminate all inequality, but cooperative organizational practices can be powerful leveling tools. Cooperative groups can question, resist, and reconfigure formal and informal practices and cultural models that shape how people interact, offering possible progressive paths toward more just and democratic workplaces.

The relative silence about workplace equality also comes from interdisciplinary research on organizations. Much of this focuses on generalizable findings, reporting how organizations mimic each other, adopt similar practices, and reproduce inequalities in generic ways.[42] A focus on social interaction within stable organizations can certainly illuminate local dynamics and patterns of meaning making. Yet organizations aren't passive recipients of their environment; people within organizations actively modify, emulate, and sometimes break institutional expectations.[43] Here Joan Acker (1989, 5) offers helpful advice: scholars should *also* focus on moments of organizational transformation—both large and small—that can expose deep-set interests and assumptions that guide people's actions.[44]

Worker-recuperated businesses are unique in this respect. They are organizations in which inequalities became starkly visible, motivating workers to question business-as-usual practices and reorganize their work.[45] In the twenty-first century, thousands of workers in Argentina have occupied closed businesses—nearly four hundred in total as of 2018—and converted

them into worker-run cooperatives.[46] The project of workplace recuperation is also underway in countries around the world.[47]

Arriving at the Hotel Bauen

On a cold January night in 2006, I sat in a dark room at the University of Michigan to watch a screening of *The Take*, a vivid documentary about Argentine businesses being occupied and converted into worker cooperatives.[48] As a member of a student housing cooperative, I had made the trek from Austin, Texas, to Ann Arbor for our annual conference.[49] After a busy day learning all sorts of facts and figures about cooperatives, I left the film screening bubbling over with questions that none of the panels and breakout sessions could answer: *Why was this happening in Argentina? What was the experience like for workers? Would the cooperatives survive?* When I had the opportunity to study abroad, Argentina was my first pick.

During my first stay in Buenos Aires in 2008, my academic adviser put me in contact with Alberto, a member of the BAUEN Cooperative. We'd come to know each other well over the next decade, but in those days Alberto was working in the press sector at the Hotel Bauen. He was the first line of contact for journalists and students like me interested in learning about the recuperated business. During our first conversations, Alberto told me about the origins of the cooperative and showed me around the hotel. I spent the next month visiting the press sector a couple of times a week, helping in any way I could (mostly translating documents into English), and attending public events and meetings at the hotel. Those weeks marked the beginning of what would become my decade-long project on the BAUEN Cooperative and the movement of worker-recuperated businesses in the city of Buenos Aires.

My research eventually involved observing work processes and interactions, interviewing members of cooperatives, attending rallies and events in the Hotel Bauen and across the city, and doing actual shift work for ten months in the BAUEN Cooperative. I spoke with local experts on worker-recuperated businesses and spent hours combing through organizational and university archives to better understand their history. I closely followed local news and public policy to track the status of ongoing challenges confronting worker-recuperated businesses in Argentina. In the appendix I detail my fieldwork, the selection of the Hotel Bauen as my case study, and my process of data analysis.

By the time I arrived at the Hotel Bauen, it had undergone a complete transformation from its origins as a privately owned and operated hotel.

When the BAUEN Cooperative reopened the facility, workers adopted democratic practices to organize their operations. Over the years, it had also become a leader in the movement of worker-recuperated businesses owing to its organizing efforts, central location, and ability to host events, press conferences, and visits from other groups. No other organization in Argentina has been this prominent, which helps explain why it received such extensive local, national, and international news coverage. The cooperative's struggles have been meticulously documented by its own members, local scholars, and national policy makers. Its guest rooms and ballrooms have been photographed for the *New York Times* and a host of similarly high-profile media outlets.[50] Its stories have been told in movie theaters and on the radio, including a full-length documentary film (Grupo Alavío 2015). These snapshots generally depict the cooperative during moments of crisis, focusing on inspiring, if carefully practiced, portrayals of efforts to advocate for workers' rights and overcome adversity.

This book takes a more holistic view of the Hotel Bauen, offering a look at not just moments of crisis but also the quotidian interactions and everyday operations of the cooperative hotel over many years. Unlike most outsiders, I committed early on to showing up, over and over again, to understand how and why workers were recuperating the business. This book is not the product of a single uninterrupted period of fieldwork but the result of extensive longitudinal research conducted over series of visits and revisits, each lasting anywhere from two weeks to a full year.[51] For nearly a decade, I returned to Buenos Aires year after year to observe and participate in working life in the hotel. When my periods of in situ fieldwork would come to a close, I didn't stop collecting data but shifted methods. I stayed in touch with my participants through WhatsApp and social media, and I followed the local news to track political and legal issues impacting the BAUEN Cooperative. Studying organizations as dynamic entities benefits from marshaling multiple types of data: observations, interviews, internal documents, and external coverage, from court files to financial reports to news media.

This approach to social scientific research is time-consuming and logistically complicated. Yet this type of long-term ethnography is crucial to both developing social theory and practicing ethical research. Throughout this book you will see how (and why) sociological theories that frequently focus on the exploitative nature of work and the stability of organizations can be elaborated through the fine-grained study of how workers redesign work and attempt to change, rather than play by, the rules of the game. All this is to say, studying one workplace over an extended period provided more

than just a rich description of a single case—it allowed me to consider the dynamic processes and changing web of relationships that constituted the organization.

Investing time and attention to understand lived experiences is also valuable because it opens doors to building meaningful relationships with the people we study. Given the BAUEN Cooperative's leadership role in the movement of recuperated businesses, longtime members were accustomed to recounting their history to outsiders. These practiced narratives were important, because they showed me how the cooperative presented itself to the public. But through my repeated visits, I was able to develop the trust needed to move beyond these scripts and into the complexities of members' experiences. Perhaps most tellingly, I embraced the cooperative ethos of mutual accountability and made sure to stay connected to the community I studied. After drafting this manuscript, I returned to the Hotel Bauen in 2019 to share my arguments and publishing plans with members of the cooperative. It was the first time I ever stayed as a guest in the hotel, and I provide a reflection on this experience in the epilogue.

Overview

The next chapter introduces the movement of worker-recuperated businesses through the fascinating history of the Hotel Bauen. I pick up where Gisela left off, when she and her coworkers occupied the hotel and began to transform it into a worker cooperative. Equality projects require that people question the status quo, collectively define what equality means for them, and take actionable steps to change how they interact. Chapter 1 explains how workplaces can undergo significant changes and how these moments of change can imprint transformative practices on existing organizations.

The subsequent chapters detail the equality project in the BAUEN Cooperative, charting how workers broadly distributed power, opportunities, and resources. Chapter 2 explains how collective decision-making took place in the BAUEN Cooperative. Structural changes to the workplace provided the legitimacy and rationale for workers to reconfigure power dynamics, sharing the authority previously held by owners and managers among the newly minted worker-owners. Drawing on many hours of observations in meetings, as well as meeting notes since the cooperative's earliest days, I show how formal efforts to broadly distribute power can sometimes be supported and at other times undermined by informal dynamics through which workers identify obstacles to participation and negotiate the meanings of fairness at work.

Chapter 3 moves from the spaces of formal decision-making—what scholars refer to as an organization's *governance*—to the ways that workers learned to participate in the everyday *management* of the hotel. For members of the BAUEN Cooperative, participation was about more than voting in meetings; they had to adopt a different approach to work itself. Workers in the hotel were encouraged to self-manage: to organize their own daily routines, problem-solve as issues arose, express their opinions, and invest their time and energy in the workplace. Formal policies enshrined this equality project in the organization's structure, but the BAUEN Cooperative also experienced cultural changes as it sought to cultivate an egalitarian ethos among its membership. As people became worker-owners—or compañeros, as they called each other—they developed an awareness of their work as a political act.

Equality projects require a lot of reflection and planning. Members must question the ways organizational practices reinforce, redefine, or even dismantle categorical distinctions in order to justify more equal interpersonal relations. In the BAUEN Cooperative, this involved confronting how everyday inequalities—many of which were widely legitimated in society—played out at work. A primary way that organizations perpetuate social inequality is by segregating people into different jobs by categories like race, class, and gender. In chapter 4 I show how the BAUEN Cooperative developed a system of job rotation to allow people to change jobs across the hotel. For housekeepers to move to accounting positions, and receptionists to move to maintenance, the cooperative had to grapple with the meaning and importance of *skill*, breaking down commonsense ways of understanding who should fill which job and affording workers a broader understanding of the organization across social differences. I also rotated jobs from sector to sector during my longest period of fieldwork in the hotel, and in doing so, I found that the practice was implemented informally. Elected officers thus exercised great discretion over job rotation. As in so many organizations, such a discretionary policy was a double-edged sword: it facilitated a more flexible and holistic approach to collective decision-making, even as it allowed bias and discrimination in its implementation.

Job rotation in the Hotel Bauen was made possible by the fact that all members were paid the same base salary. Chapter 5 delves into the politics of equal pay. I explore how the organization navigated its commitment to pay equity in a context of scarcity by developing a system of what I call *survival finance*. Survival finance addresses three primary ways that workers benefit from full-time employment: wages, credit, and time. As a key part of its equality project, the cooperative's effort to broadly distribute resources

was a straightforward reflection of the organization's values. Despite spirited debates and lofty ideals, however, workers in the BAUEN Cooperative continually put in long hours doing physically demanding labor. Chapter 6 explores the effects of this overwork and discusses how workers reconciled their emotional and physical pain with their broader purpose as members of a worker-recuperated business.

The BAUEN Cooperative's remarkable success was never easy. From day one, the cooperative navigated twists, turns, roadblocks, and dead ends. Throughout its operation until its closure in 2020, the cooperative's use of the Hotel Bauen remained legally unresolved. In chapter 6 I explain why the hotel survived and continued to pursue its equality project for so long. The BAUEN Cooperative was able to remain open for business not because politicians neglected its appeals, nor because the government lacked the resources to enforce the law. Rather, I argue that it survived due to the state's *unwillingness* to resolve its situation.

The cooperative's trials and tribulations in securing its legality cannot be separated from its equality project. At the Hotel Bauen, joining the cooperative provided both a source of work and inside access to a social movement that questioned the legitimacy of private property and challenged state authority. By chronicling efforts to legalize their occupation, I show how this long-term campaign led workers to incorporate social movement practices into their everyday work routines. Equality projects, I argue, can transform organizations into activist workplaces in which production and resistance combine to transform the meanings and practices of paid work.

In the conclusion I reflect on the broader lessons of the BAUEN Cooperative and revisit the theoretical and political issues they raise. Returning to the idea of equality projects as a way to understand social change in and beyond the workplace, I advocate for scholarship that not only explains inequality and exclusion but also analyzes the creative solutions people adopt to address social problems. The epilogue provides an update on the status of the Hotel Bauen at the time of publication and explores the potentials of workplace recuperation in and beyond Argentina.

Somos presente y futuro
A resistir y ocupar
El Bauen hoy no se cierra
Lo vamos a levantar

We are the present and the future
To resist and occupy
The "Bauen" doesn't close today
We are going to lift it up

—CHANT IN THE HOTEL BAUEN

1 Recuperating the Hotel Bauen

"The hotel was born bad and ended worse," Lacunza told me one afternoon in the Hotel Bauen. He knew its history well: he had started working here soon after it opened and eventually became a founder of the cooperative. Now in his fifties, he had worked as a receptionist for over thirty years, nearly twenty of them at the Hotel Bauen. When I ran into Lacunza on the third floor, he was hard at work plastering the walls of an unused office in preparation for new tenants. I joined him as he sat down to evaluate his progress. Showing me his work, he reiterated that the hotel "was born bad from the moment it was constructed." Sure, the office looked good with a fresh coat of plaster, but Lacunza insisted the hotel needed far more than cosmetic repairs. I noted

Notes

Introduction

1. Scholars of inequality rarely address the normative assumptions and implications of these theories. A recent exception is Dustin Avent-Holt (2020). Applying egalitarian frameworks to rent theory, he argues that it fundamentally fails to capture why distributional inequalities are normatively problematic. See also Wright (2006, 2010).

2. Gisela was a vocal advocate for the cooperative and regularly spoke in public forums about her experience in the hotel. I conducted three interviews with Gisela over the course of my fieldwork. To recount her story in her own words, I also draw on excerpts from an interview that Gisela had with a journalist I met and hosted for an afternoon while I was working in the Hotel Bauen in 2015. I use

excerpts from this transcript with permission. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

3. Between 1976 and 1983, a military junta held power in Argentina, part of a cycle of civilian and military governments that had begun in the 1950s with the ousting of Juan Domingo Perón. This period of military rule also coincided with violent state-sponsored terrorism supported by Operation Condor, a US-led intelligence operation to fight communism in South America (Brennan 2018; McSherry 2005).

4. For more information on how social activism flourished during and after the 2001 crisis, see Svampa, Bombal, and Bergel (2003). On the lasting impacts of the crisis twenty years later, see Pérez and Sobering (2022).

5. On the organization and emergence of *piqueteros* in Argentina, see Svampa and Pereyra (2003). For a fascinating update that examines what has happened to *piqueteros* since the movement surged, see Pérez (2018).

6. On the MNER, see Magnani (2009). On bankruptcy in Argentina and the effects of the 2011 reforms to the Bankruptcy Law on worker-recuperated businesses, see Ruggeri (2014a, 21–24).

7. *Compañero* translates to "comrade," "compatriot," or "colleague" and is generally used to refer to someone of equal status. Unlike other synonyms for "coworker" (i.e., *colega*), *compañero* has political connotations. It is not only used by activists to refer to one another but also commonly used to refer to members of the Peronist party.

8. When referring to the physical location, many people still call the tower the Hotel Bauen, so I have followed that usage. When I refer explicitly to the cooperative, I use the organization's name, BAUEN.

9. Scott Harris (2006a) breaks down uses of equality into four approaches: (1) operationalizing equality in a rational manner; (2) identifying factors that promote or reduce equality in a given situation; (3) determining the beneficial and negative effects of the presence of inequality; and (4) recommending social reforms to address inequalities and their consequences. See also White (2007).

10. As Thomas DiPrete and Brittany Fox-Williams (2021, 3) state, sociological research "makes a strong case for the desirability of inequality reduction, and it points to large-scale social transformations that might accomplish this objective, but it often neglects or insufficiently engages in the task of elucidating how this social transformation might occur." See also Cancian (1995).

11. By centering this project on equality rather than inequality, I do not intend to reify equality. When applied without differentiation or attention to the complexities of a given context, equality is a dangerous idea that can deny differences and "bleach away the variation of human experience" (Rae 1981, 18). I neither seek to promote a single idea of equality nor argue that equality stands for nothing (Westen 1982) but rather to advocate for the study of equality in practice. Terms like *egalitarian*, *equity*, and *equality* are sometimes distinguished but often used interchangeably. In this book I use the term *equality* to bridge interdisciplinary debates on equality and inequality in the humanities and social sciences.

12. A long line of egalitarian thinkers have debated equality in principle. A simple understanding of equality refers to a static state in which all people are

treated as if they are interchangeable. Scholars who meaningfully consider these questions usually adopt a complex definition of equality, acknowledging that people can be equally valued even though they have different skills, interests, and talents (Walzer 1984).

13. To Dietrich Rueschemeyer (2005), political equality is deeply shaped by social inequalities in power, status, and resources. Thus, unless societies limit the effects of these inequalities, the possibility for meaningful political equality will be constrained.

14. Most basically, justice means fairness, or the application of impartiality free from personal biases and vested interests. John Rawls (2005) promoted this "justice as fairness" approach. For a more detailed discussion of a Rawlsian conception of justice, see Sen (2009, chap. 2). A long line of social theorists—from Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant to Ronald Dworkin—have sought to identify the rules and arrangements of "just institutions." Amartya Sen (2009, 6–8) calls these "contractarian" modes of thinking because they identify a social contract that specifies the terms of justice.

15. There are a host of proposed approaches to distributive equality. One approach focuses on material resources, or what Rawls (2005) calls "basic goods," while others focus on equality of opportunities to access advantages, may it be through a fair lottery system (where everyone has the same chances of winning) or through the creation of "starting-gate equality" (where young people are ensured equal opportunities). A second approach considers the notion of equal access as a criterion for equality. Similar to the idea of equal opportunity, equal access does not mean that all people should make the same hourly wages or that everyone must flourish equally. Rather, a just society is one in which the failures to do so are not the result of inequalities in basic access to social and material resources (Wright 2010). A third approach contends that social arenas or "spheres" should follow different criteria for the distribution of social goods. According to Michael Walzer (1984, 19), "complex equality means that no citizen's standing in one sphere or with regard to one social good can be undercut by his standing in some other sphere, with regard to some other good."

16. I understand recognition as the social practices through which people communicate mutual respect and validate their standing as moral equals within a society (Anderson 1999; Fraser 2000; Lamont 2018).

17. Douglas Rae (1981, 4) describes this as the process through which "equality" in the abstract fissions into "equalities" in practice.

18. This approach to studying inequality reflects a substantialist ontology that characterizes various kinds of things, beings, and essences as the fundamental units of inquiry (Emirbayer 1997). As Donald Tomaskovic-Devey and Dustin Avent-Holt (2019, 14) argue, "The assumption that social causes inhere in individuals, rather than social relationships, is simply wrong."

19. Joan Acker (2006) differentiates between people's awareness of inequalities and the legitimacy of inequalities, both of which vary by organization, by the position of an individual within that organization, and by political and economic context. As Acker explains, "Class is highly legitimate in US organizations, as

class practices, such as paying wages and maintaining supervisory oversight, are basic to organizing work in capitalist economies [. . . whereas] gender and race inequality are less legitimate than class" (453), given civil rights and labor laws.

20. See Mishel and Wolfe (2019). In comparison to the United States, corporate executives in Argentina make far less (US$77,000 per year on average in 2019) but still more than the average annual salary across all workers (US$41,000). See Rebón (2019).

21. On the Occupy movement, see Graeber (2014).

22. Definitions of equality and inequality are the product of interpretation and are socially constructed in practice (Harris 2003, 2006a, 2006b). How people collectively make sense of equality and inequality is deeply contextual, takes constant work, and can also break down (Waldron 2017).

23. I define organizations as "socially constructed spaces in which individuals' efforts are coordinated to jointly accomplish a set of tasks to fulfill some goal or set of linked goals" (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019, 2; see also Kellogg 2009; Roscigno 2011; Weick 2000). Throughout this book I use the terms *organization* and *workplace* interchangeably. On the importance of organizations for understanding inequality, see Baron and Bielby (1980); Reskin (1993); Tilly (1998); and Tomaskovic-Devey (1993).

24. The idea of equality as an ongoing project is also consistent with the work of relational egalitarian theorists (Wallimann-Helmer, Schuppert, and Fourie 2015). If a just society is one in which members can relate to each other on an equal footing, the task is then to determine what institutional arrangements and social practices enable such interactions. As Samuel Scheffler (2015, 30–31) explains, "Sustaining an egalitarian relationship requires creativity, the exercise of judgement, and ongoing mutual commitment, and even the sincere efforts of the parties are no guarantee of success, although success is a matter of degree."

25. Building on the work of Charles Tilly (1998), relational inequality theory outlines a series of processes that explain how and why inequalities are produced and persist over time (see also Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2010; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2009; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014; Weeden 2002; Wilson and Roscigno 2014). Feminist scholars have long modeled a fundamentally relational approach, understanding gender not simply as the study of women's issues but as an interactional accomplishment that uses gender to legitimize male domination (Acker 2006; Chodorow 1978, 2000; Rich 1980). On relational sociology, see also Emirbayer (1997).

26. Acker's (2006) notion of "inequality regimes" has been widely used to understand the organizational production of inequality (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019, chap. 4; see also Meyers and Vallas 2016). Inequality regimes vary by organization and over time. Given this variation, Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt (2019, 81) call for more attention to the variation between organizations to recognize more (or less) egalitarian contexts.

27. Inclusion is key to organizational change processes. As Katherine Kellogg (2009) argues in her study of operating rooms in the United States, the success

relies on the creation of *relational spaces*, a type of free space that includes people from different positions to support and sustain reforms against defenders of the status quo.

28. Equality is not a preexisting "thing" to discover but rather a social construction with multiple meanings that are context specific (Rae 1981). As Harris (2006a, 9) points out, "This does not mean that 'it is forbidden' for sociologists to construct their own 'objective' definitions for equality—'objective,' that is, from the perspective of a particular community of researchers."

29. Here, I build on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (2014, 13) conceptualization of projects as social processes that link social structures and representations.

30. My use of the word *project* draws on the notion of "projectivity" developed by Alfred Schutz (1967) to capture the future-oriented dimension of social action (see Beckert 2016; Mische 2009).

31. The Real Utopias Project has been far-reaching, analyzing issues from market socialism and participatory governance to universal basic income and gender equality (Wright 2010).

32. G. A. Cohen (2008) developed the concept of an "egalitarian ethos" to critique Rawls's theory of justice. While Cohen focuses on individual-level action, I use the term to think about organizational culture. Following Tim Hallett (2003), I understand organizational culture as a negotiated order that emerges through interactions and is influenced by those with the symbolic power to define the situation. Culture is a system of widely shared values and beliefs that are used to organize social processes. In organizations, as William Foote Whyte and Kathleen King Whyte (1991, 270–71) explain, culture emerges out of efforts to solve social, economic, and political problems.

33. On the participatory theory of democracy and arguments for democratizing the workplace, see Carole Pateman (1970, 2012).

34. Workplaces, Elizabeth Anderson (2017) argues, should be understood as a form of *private government* that is unaccountable to the people it governs. The legal authority of private employers to regulate employees extends beyond the workday, from control over their politics and speech to their choice of sexual partners, recreational drug use, and physical activities. Other scholars have documented workers draw this analogy unprompted. For example, an IT professional in Erin Kelly and Phyllis Moen's (2020, 13) study of organizational change called the management style at his firm "more of a dictatorship than anything."

35. Worker-owned businesses are just one type of cooperative association. According to the International Cooperative Alliance (n.d.), a cooperative can be defined as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise." Cooperatives are generally classified into three types: (1) producer cooperatives that pool resources to purchase shared supplies and equipment (i.e., agriculture and craft co-ops); (2) consumer cooperatives that coordinate the provision of affordable goods and services to their members (i.e., food and retail co-ops, childcare collectives, credit

unions); and (3) worker cooperatives that provide job security and democratic economic participation to workers.

36. While the international cooperative movement traces its historical roots to white cooperators like the Rochdale Pioneers, movements for Black civil rights and economic equality are a critical part of the contemporary cooperative movement. In her important book, Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014) expertly shows how democratic economic participation has been practiced in low-income communities and by Black communities and people of color in the United States.

37. These principles were codified by the International Cooperative Alliance, which was formed in 1895 to support cooperatives around the globe. On cooperative legal structures in different countries, see Cracogna, Fici, and Henrÿ (2013).

38. For a collection of recent work on cooperatives, see Chen and Chen (2021). On worker cooperatives in the United States, see Gunn (1984); Mansbridge (1980); Mellor, Hannah, and Stirling (1988); Rothschild and Whitt (1986); and Viggiani (1997). On retail worker cooperatives in California, see Meyers (2022). On Cooperative Home Care Associates, the largest worker cooperative in the United States, see Berry (2013) and Berry and Bell (2018). On Mondragón, see Cheney (1999); Hacker (1989); and Kasmir (1996). On small health care cooperatives, see Kleinman (1996).

39. For a review of gender inequality in worker cooperatives, see Sobering, Thomas, and Williams (2014). See also Meyers and Vallas (2016).

40. On the theory of gendered organizations, see Acker (1990, 2006). On understanding organizations as racialized structures, see Ray (2019) and Wooten and Couloute (2017).

41. According to Patricia Yancey Martin (1990, 189), the focus on failures is connected to the problem of assessing organizational purity such that any inconsistencies or conflicts among goals, practices, and outcomes "are depicted as fatal or disqualifying flaws." On the interesting debates over whether feminist organizations can be effective, see Staggenborg (1995).

42. This perspective has been advanced by theories of organizational ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1977) and institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Although organizations often imitate each other, workers still resist (Burawoy 1979; Roscigno and Hodson 2004; Vallas 2006) and demand dignity at work (Hodson 1995, 2001).

43. Responding to the critiques of neoinstitutionalism, Tim Hallett and Marc Ventresca (2006, 226) develop an "inhabited" approach to institutions that focuses on the "people whose social interactions infuse those institutions with force and meaning."

44. On initiatives to "redesign and redefine work," see Correll et al. (2014); Correll (2017); and Kelly and Moen (2020).

45. J. K. Gibson-Graham (2003) calls these "capitalocentric" logics. For research on the motivations to form alternative organizations, see the edited volumes by Maurizio Atzeni (2012) and Martin Parker and colleagues (2014).

46. Surveys of worker-recuperated businesses have been conducted by the Open Faculty Program (Programa Facultad Abierta) at the University of Buenos

Aires since 2003 (Programa Facultad Abierta 2003; Ruggeri 2011, 2014a, 2016; Ruggeri, Trinchero, and Martinez 2005; Ruggeri and Vieta 2015; Vieta 2019).

47. Private firms have been recuperated in other national contexts. For an insightful analysis of case studies in the United States and Latin America, see Ranis (2016). On Brazil, see Henriques et al. (2013). On Uruguay, see Rieiro (2009). On Greece, see Kokkinidis (2015). On Italy, see Vieta, Depedri, and Carrano (2017).

48. Directed by Avi Lewis and written by Naomi Klein, *The Take* (2004) documents workplace occupations in the early twenty-first century, focusing on the story of workers in a metallurgical factory called FORJA San Martín. For an update on the case of FORJA and an exploration of why some alternative organizations survive and others cease to operate, see Sobering and Lapegna (2021).

49. The North American Students of Cooperation continues to meet annually in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

50. For just one of many examples, see Kennard and Caistor-Arendar (2016).

51. The multiple periods of fieldwork I conducted are similar to what Michael Burawoy (2003) calls *focused revisits*. A focused revisit "occurs when an ethnographer undertakes participant observation, that is, studying others in their space and time, with a view to comparing his or her site with the same one studied at an earlier point in time, whether by him or herself or by someone else" (646). I used each period of fieldwork to continue data collection and also to compare data over time. This required an attention to not only changes in the cooperative and its environment but also my shifting involvement as an observer as well as the theories I brought with me. See the appendix for more on this reflection.

Chapter One: Recuperating the Hotel Bauen

1. Following Christopher Marquis and András Tilcsik (2013, 199), I understand imprinting as "a process whereby during a brief period of susceptibility, a focal entity develops characteristics that reflect prominent features of the environment, and these characteristics continue to persist despite significant environmental changes in subsequent periods." For a review of the concept of imprinting, which began with the work of Arthur Stinchcombe (1965), see Marquis and Tilcsik (2013).

2. Victoria Johnson (2007) argues that organizational imprinting happens through a process of cultural entrepreneurship, which involves both the creativity of the founders and the constraints and opportunities of their particular historical context. Imprinting is an agency-driven process, whereby "key stakeholders . . . may reinforce or thwart entrepreneurs' plans, whether these be isomorphic or innovative in nature" (117).

3. Despite trends toward flexible organizational forms, much organizational theory focuses on change-inhibiting forces, explaining organizations' structural rigidities, inertial tendencies, institutionalization, and path dependencies (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Hannan and Freeman 1977; Sydow, Schreyögg, and Koch 2009).

4. Christopher Marquis and András Tilcsik (2013, 221) argue that imprinting is not limited to an organization's founding moment but can also take place during