The Public as Plural

Popular Economy and Agroecological Workplaces in Argentina (2015-2023)

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Abstract

Across Latin America, diverse local actors engage in the defence and creation of public initiatives against processes of extractivism, privatisation, and dispossession. Emerging as alternatives to the hegemony of agribusiness, and revitalising labour organisations, in Argentina, popular economy and agroecological movements are reimagining the public. On formerly disused public lands, they create workplaces to progress towards social inclusion and environmental regeneration.

In this thesis, I show how their practices express a distinct form of publicness. I argue that publicness can be understood in three interconnected ways. First, it takes a plural form. Through collaboration among different groups of participants at the local level, a mosaic of various actors contributes to the construction of popular economy and agroecological initiatives. This plural mosaic can include the participation of state agencies. However, these initiatives transcend a state-centred form of publicness, since they depend on the commitment of popular economy workers alongside various environmental activists. Second, at the heart of this plural form of publicness is a specific type of participant subjectivity: that of the worker and producer. The centrality of workers underpins the popular and agroecological form of publicness. Third, this publicness involves the active transformation of concrete spatialities, places that are reimagined and reconstructed by participants to become productive. In these sites, economic production is oriented towards encompassing socio-environmental aims.

A qualitative study examining two cases from the provinces of Entre Ríos and Buenos Aires enables me to construct concepts grounded in the experiences of two significant agroecological and popular economy movements in Argentina: the UTT and the UTEP. The cases also allow to identify the differences in local government support for the initiatives. My findings are rooted in the socio-political context of Argentina post-2015, characterised by increasing social mobilisation of popular sectors. My analysis provides situated conceptualisations and analytical insights to support research on the emerging forms of participatory publicness in the 21st century.

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Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Acronyms

CTEP: Confederation of Popular Economy Workers (*Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular*)

MTE: Movement of Excluded Workers (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Excluidos*)

RENAMA: National Network of Municipalities and Communities Promoting Agroecology (*Red Nacional de Municipios y Comunidades que fomentan la Agroecología*)

UTEP: Popular Economy Workers Union (*Unión de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular*)

UTT: Land Workers' Union (*Unión de Trabajadores de la Tierra*)

Co.Te.Po: UTT's Popular and Technical Consulting network (*Consultorio Técnico Popular*)

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Thinking publicness as plural

The definition of publicness and its relevance in our contemporary societies is up for debate. It is a broad, multifaceted, and contested concept. Its interpretation and significance vary across different socio-political groups and geographies. Publicness can be defined in relation to a "context for action", a public space that can take many forms. It can also make reference to a public "kind of action", and a "collective actor", which is the public (Iveson, 2007). In addition, there are divergent positions across the political spectrum in reference to the role that public places, public initiatives, and the public as an actor should have for addressing contemporary systemic challenges, such as social inclusion, economic production, and environmental protection. One viewpoint suggests that public initiatives should be minimal, arguing that the market and private entities should have a prevailing role. In contrast, another position advocates for a reinvigoration of public initiatives, contending that privates often fall short in addressing important collective or societal issues such as the growth of inequality, and the dangers of climate change and environmental pollution, among others.

There is not a single form of publicness, but multiple, context-dependent forms. With this thesis I aim to situate myself in this debate about the forms of publicness. The aim of this thesis is to understand the manifestations of publicness by learning from contemporary experiences of popular economy and agroecological initiatives in Argentina. I question how publicness is constructed within these initiatives. First, I identify the kinds of actors who participate in this construction. Next, I conceptualise the specific type of participant subjectivity that is central to these initiatives. Then, I analyse how publicness is developed in relation to the way space is signified. I argue that in these initiatives, publicness acquires a form that is at the same time plural, labour-oriented, and incorporates a socio-environmental approach.

In this thesis, I show that publicness can be understood as plural because it is a practice that depends on the collaborative relations established by a mosaic of actors. While state agencies are part of this dynamic, publicness extends beyond

just state actors. It encompasses other networks and groups. Significantly, it is constructed by the active participation of workers organised into labour union movements, as well as various environmental activists that could include non-governmental organisations, advisors, and volunteers. In this way, publicness transcends state-centred understandings.

Furthermore, I argue that publicness as a practice can be seen in relation to participants' subjectivities and the transformation of spaces. In the cases I examine, public lands that were not in use are transformed by participants who centrally identify themselves as workers and producers. These formerly abandoned public lands become workplaces for agroecological production. Their practices also emerge as an alternative to agribusiness and challenge processes of land dispossession.

Argentina represents a distinct context for studying how public spaces can be constructed in a plural way. The actors who are the protagonists of this plural mosaic are the heirs of a long historical process that traces back to the socio-economic collapse leading to the crisis of 2001. During that time, movements of unemployed workers filled the streets to advocate for better living conditions and organised within their neighbourhoods to find ways to cope with the crisis. In the following years, Argentina experienced an economic recovery and new socio-political dynamics. The emerging social movements found potential interlocutors in state agencies through redistributive policies and the expansion of social programmes. However, this was not a simple 'return of the state': the participation of the movements was key for political action. More recently, the social impact of a new cycle of economic crisis has highlighted the issue of the lack of access to adequate and healthy food for a large portion of the population, alongside the need for land access for food producers, the land workers. This thesis focuses on a form of publicness that the movements build with but also beyond the state in response to these issues.

Beyond the epicentre of global capitalism, in Latin America, various political actors including social movements and, in some cases, state agencies, have been experimenting at the local scale with new participatory forms of reclaiming the economy from private corporations (Cumbers, 2012; Ouviña & Renna, 2022; Thwaites Rey et al., 2018). The cases I study are part of this phenomenon in a

distinct way. In Argentina, a new political subject is emerging: a working class that has been excluded from the conventional labour market. While this exclusion is not a novel phenomenon, the organisation of this segment of the working class into alternative labour union movements is significant (Abal Medina, 2016). These movements are innovating with the creation of workplaces that do not follow traditional prescriptions of how a private company should be organised. Rather, they organise themselves cooperatively, seek to build less hierarchical relationships, promote collective ownership of the means of production, and aim to make a living while at the same time being committed to public issues such as regenerating the environment and advancing social inclusion.

This new working class is organised into social movements that adopt the principles of labour unions, that is, protecting the rights of workers and battling to improve their working conditions. However, in contrast with traditional labour unions, they do not have a direct employer with whom they could negotiate and oppose (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014). They direct their claims to the state, and promote forms of cooperation with several actors in local communities, in the civil society, as well as from governments, in order to progress with the strengthening of their initiatives. The emergence of these alternative forms of labour highlight that our contemporary world is one of diverse economies, with vast and varied practices that move beyond the production for a market in a capitalist firm (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

This opens up the possibility of experimenting with new forms of publicness, created by the participation of these labour movements to create alternative economic spaces. In a world of multiple competing publics, there are some which promote the participation of subordinated social groups (Fraser, 1990). My research shows a form of publicness that is constructed to allocate this kind of participation, with the popular economy workers as its core.

Within the realm of popular economy initiatives in Argentina, agroecology, an approach for progressing towards food sovereignty, environmental restoration and regeneration, and the well-being of producers and consumers, is taking prevalence. Latin America is the worldwide focal point of an “agroecological revolution” (Altieri & Toledo, 2011) “politically charged” and “popularly

organised" against neoliberalism (Rosset et al., 2022). The idea of agroecology can sometimes be confused with that of organic agriculture, despite not being equivalent. The organic agriculture approach is a set of standardised techniques to manage production in order to make it more sustainable, by restricting the use of synthetic pesticides, fertilisers, and genetically-modified products (Migliorini & Wezel, 2017a). Agroecology takes inspiration from organic methods, but it can be defined as an orientation that goes beyond its focus on technical procedures. While the term organic[1] is presented as a depoliticised production process (Rosset et al., 2022), agroecological movements seek to repoliticise practices. They have been characterised as emancipatory and popular, oppose to extractivism and concentrated agribusiness schemes, challenge power structures, support the right to land for workers, and promote cooperative and collective association (Giraldo & Rosset, 2021).

In Argentina, the political stake of these agroecological initiatives is evident considering the dominance of the agribusiness model, which agroecological movements oppose. Argentina is a country known for its agricultural products that become commodities for the international market. It has been documented that this kind of production configures a hegemonic agrarian model, dominated by transnational companies that obtain elevated profits by causing significant destructive impacts on the ecosystem and the health of populations, and displacing local communities (Giarracca & Teubal, 2010). As part of the "commodities consensus" model, Argentina has experienced increasing levels of land privatisation to facilitate the entry of capitals for, mainly, transgenic soy production, as well as the displacement and dispossession of the population living in these lands via violent methods (Brent, 2015; Gras & Hernández, 2014). Agroecological movements present an alternative to the agribusiness model by proposing another form of producing which cares for socio-environmental well-being, as well as supports agrarian reform and land access for landless farmers (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). This also sets the stage for creating forms of

[1] There are no official global certifications for agroecological products in contrast to the organic and biodynamic labels (Migliorini & Wezel, 2017b). These certifications can be excessively costly to purchase for workers from the popular economy sector.

publicness that address socio-environmental issues and reclaim spaces for agricultural production for the growing population of landless workers.

I have chosen for my research two case studies that show the distinctive characteristics of agroecological and popular economy initiatives in contemporary Argentina, between 2015 and 2023. I analyse the dynamics between participants in two workplaces located in municipalities of the Argentinean Pampa region, one in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area and the other in the Entre Ríos province. Both are sites which were formerly abandoned or in decay, and rebuilt and repurposed to become agroecological workplaces. Although these lands are owned by the state, they were in a deteriorating condition prior to the advent of the participatory initiatives that I study. This was either due to the misuse of previous private concessionaires in the case of Entre Ríos, or due to the withdrawal of activities from the state in Buenos Aires. By setting up their workplaces in these vacant spaces, landless workers can access land in common for agroecological production.

By examining these cases, I show how the participation of several actors, mainly the labour union movements but also other activists and governmental institutions, reimagine and construct alternative public spaces. This is a sign of the limitations of the state in contemporary politics to construct publicness, but at the same time, how it continues to be relevant for its sustainment. The state institutions show that they are not enough by themselves to build dynamic and operational public spaces, and require the active participation of further actors. At the same time, movements and the civil society are not enough on their own. This is because these social actors, by themselves, do not have enough resources to sustain these initiatives, especially because they belong to the popular economy sector, which is mainly composed by subaltern workers. These efforts of rebuilding unfold in a context of socio-economic crisis and resource scarcity. Ultimately, I show how publicness can be understood as a plural mosaic of actors that collaborate for the creation of these spaces.

The research that underpins this thesis focuses on the study of these two case studies through a qualitative methodological approach to understand how publicness is constructed and how public spaces are reclaimed. It does so in a situated manner, which means that addressing the research question on the

forms of publicness is built in reference to the particular socio-political and geographical context of study, from fieldwork carried out in the workplaces where the initiatives unfold. I identify and analyse how participants signify their practices, and then develop theoretical insights based on these worlds of meanings created by actors. Semi-structured interviews with participants have been the primary method to approach these worlds of meanings. These interviews were supported by participant observations, particularly in the site of the workplaces, to help capture the spatial dimensions of the phenomenon.

The examination of the collected qualitative information led to the formulation of a series of "core codes" (Punch, 2014) or analytic dimensions that conceptualise the form that publicness takes in the studied cases. I propose three main dimensions, which also inform the structure of the empirical chapters (4 to 6). First, publicness can be conceptualised as plural, and this can be seen in the mosaic of actors that participate in the construction of the initiatives explored: from social movements that are organised into a labour union format for the resolution of work-related issues, to various environmental activists, as well as state agencies. There is, then, not a single group for the production of publicness. Second, publicness is centrally related to labour-based subjectivities in these case studies. Motivations related to making a living, having a job, improving economically, accessing land, and incorporating and sharing work-related knowledge are crucial for the participants in the everyday life of the workplaces. Rather than an abstract form of public subjectivity, the key subjects of these initiatives define themselves as workers and producers, in their concrete and everyday life experience. Third, publicness is understood in its spatial dimension. Participants aim to restore and rebuild the public spaces in order to convert them to workplaces, to fulfil both productive as well as socio-environmental aims at the same time. They do not see economic production as opposed to being committed to social and environmental causes, on the contrary, they believe that both are joint efforts for creating a publicly inclusive spatiality.

Returning to Iveson's (2007) multifaceted definition of publicness, the three dimensions that this concept acquires can be observed in its particular form in the cases under study. First, publicness as a "collective actor", in the case of

this thesis, means a mosaic of plural actors that configure the *who*. Second, publicness as a "kind of action" or the *how*, here oriented by productive and socio-environmental public causes. Third, publicness as a "context for action" or the *where*, spatialities that are here, in principle, owned by the state but activated with the participation of a myriad of actors.

My thesis is also informed by three broad bodies of literature that helped me develop my approach. These are, first, theories on municipalist and remunicipalisation movements that defend and reclaim publicness at the local level, on urban public spaces. Then, on the conceptualisation of social economy and popular economy and last, about agroecology as a socio-environmental movement as well as community gardening and other urban growing initiatives at the local scale.

A first group of studies provide valuable insights to understand publicness as a local political and participatory practice that challenges processes of privatisation and builds spaces to advance social inclusion. To begin with, I refer to a growing literature on municipalist politics and remunicipalisation initiatives. The insights gained from this literature have guided the development of my research question, sparking an interest in discovering how publicness can be created at the municipal level. It has offered valuable insights to avoid seeing the municipal scale and local politics merely as a constrained and lower arena compared to the national level, or as one that is only nested under the nation-state. The municipal level is also a site of political action and participation (Cumbers & Paul, 2020; Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2020), as well as of construction of publicness and of questioning of the trends towards privatisation. Furthermore, studies on remunicipalisation help situate the idea of publicness and public ownership at the centre of the debate, indicating how urban spaces across the world initiate processes of deprivatisation and return to public ownership of assets and services (Angel, 2017; Cumbers & Becker, 2018; Cumbers & Paul, 2022). In fact, my PhD research is conducted as part of a collective transnational comparative project titled "Global Remunicipalisation and the Post-Neoliberal Turn" (GLOBALMUN). In order to understand this revalorisation of publicness from a spatial point of view, I also include references to the literature on urban public spaces. These works help me view

public spaces as places for social inclusion and political participation (Amin, 2008; S. Low et al., 2005) as well as in its conflictive dimension for the right to access and representation in the public sphere (Mitchell, 2003), which are important dimensions to understand the actions of the movements that I study here.

Next, I examine the literature that delves into the concepts of social economy first, and then, popular economy. Both groups of studies have been successful in identifying the global proliferation of alternative economic initiatives, after the crisis of the Fordist capitalist model of social integration via employment. The first notion, emerging earlier in the academic discussion, emphasises the ethics and principles that should guide these initiatives such as solidarity, mutual aid, non-profit, democracy, cooperation and autonomy (Amin, 2009). It also suggests that these initiatives should be distinguished from the market and its individualistic and competitive principles, and the state with its authoritarian and centralistic procedures, as a third sector (Bridge et al., 2014). However, as the literature on popular economy shows, as well as the present thesis, actual cases need to adopt a more nuanced approach. I argue here for a pluralistic view of publicness, that helps to the conceptualisation of these alternative economies and its initiatives as composed of a diverse set of actors, which also may include in some cases the support of state agencies.

In turn, the notion of popular economy is more specific for the Argentinian context. It helps me to consider the relevance of the political agency of popular economy participants, as several works in this literature show how they organised into labour union movements to demand for better working and living conditions (Coraggio & Loritz, 2022; Fernández Álvarez, 2016; Palumbo & Buratovich, 2021; Rach, 2021). Incorporating the discussions on popular economy to my thesis provides a foundation for conceptualising publicness as labour-related in the context of my case studies.

Last, I delve into the literature on agroecology as well as urban growing initiatives such as community gardens. Sensibly, studies about agroecology have stressed the need to address it as a movement with political implications and not just a method of farming. The literature identified in Latin America an “agroecological revolution” (Altieri & Toledo, 2011) that expanded across the

globe, with international networks that support this growth, such as *Vía Campesina* (the Peasant Way) (Desmarais, 2008). In my thesis I pay attention to the rooted and situated phenomenon of agroecology by studying two local cases in-depth. Literature on growing urban initiatives has also helped me to highlight the relevance of these local participatory experiences to reinvigorate dilapidated urban spaces, in contexts of economic downturn and as a response to public disinvestment (Crossan et al., 2016; Draus et al., 2014). However, in contrast to many of these initiatives, popular economy agroecological spaces are not primarily spaces of leisure and escape (Traill, 2023), but workplaces, sites that are part of workers' everyday routines to make a living. They are not, at the same time, mere spaces for the relief of the poor (Kurtz, 2001), but sites of political creation, dispute, and reimagination of alternative futures.

With these ideas in mind, in the next section, I provide an overview of the phenomenon of popular economy and agroecology in Argentine recent history, that helps to situate the case studies and understand the significance of these two concepts.

1.2 Situating popular economy and agroecological initiatives

The Argentinian context provides a valuable lens through which to examine the question of publicness and its mutation towards more participatory and pluralistic modalities. As I argue in this thesis, the vibrant phenomenon of popular economy movements and initiatives in Argentina presents a unique opportunity to explore this topic, as it offers a compelling illustration of how publicness can be created by a rising, new working class which differs from the traditional proletariat. In my research, this exploration is intertwined with the appeal for an agroecological form of production, understood as a movement with political implications. The agroecological cause plays a part in the broader popular economy phenomenon, with many workers turning to this ideal and practice to guide economic initiatives that let them earn a livelihood with a socio-environmental commitment. Movements reclaim and rebuild public spaces for the purpose of creating workplaces for agroecological production, and in doing so, they construct specific forms of publicness, defined by its plural, labour-oriented, and socio-environmental characteristics.

Workers' movements have played a significant role in Latin American politics throughout the 20th century. During the phase of industrialisation that Argentina and other countries experienced, organised labour unions were central to understand the political and economic dynamics of the region (Horowitz, 2001; Munck, 2020). Even during dictatorships, workers' organisations remained active alongside new emergent human rights movements, although severely affected for being one of the main targets of repressive state terrorism (Munck, 2020; Palomino, 2005). This is the traditional image that we have of labour unions, composed by workers organised in factory committees. The impact of neoliberalisation processes in the latter decades of the century significantly altered the labour structure, leading to a diminished presence of this image of the proletariat. The crisis of the labour market, at first, attenuated the power and strength of labour unions (Palomino, 2005). This might have resulted in the demise of the strength of labour movements in Argentina have they not adapted to the representation of workers in emergent forms of labour. In fact, since 2001, as Munck states, "against international trends, the study of trade unions in Argentina has regained importance" (2020, p. 33). My thesis focuses on the participation of new labour movements that represent the emergent popular economy sector. I also show the engagement of popular economy workers' movements with socio-environmental causes, indicating how these causes can also be pursued and led by working class organisations.

The popular economy as an organised phenomenon derives from the processes of neoliberalisation in Argentina, unfolding during the late 20th century[2]. Quijano (2008) indicates that towards the end of the 20th century it is possible to identify, on a global scale, a marked increase in unemployment levels that

[2] I am here referring to the socio-political phenomenon of popular economy, expressed in the growth of social movements organised to resist the consequences of the exclusionary neoliberal policies in Argentina. However, the existence of "surplus populations" within the unequal and dependent form of capitalism that characterises Latin America was present even during the peak of the industrialisation processes in the region. This was early theorised by Quijano (1972) and Nun (1999) who proposed, respectively, the concepts of "marginal pole" and "marginal mass". They identify the phenomenon of marginalisation of broad sectors of the population in relation to the most dynamic and productive sectors of the capitalist economy. Towards the end of the 20th century, this issue is further exacerbated by the implementation of neoliberal policies. In Argentina, in particular, the organised popular economy expands as a response to the crisis brought about by these neoliberalisation processes. It is possible to identify different timelines in other countries. In other South American countries such as Chile, especially after 1973, popular economy expressions multiplied at the neighbourhood scale to resist increasing levels of social exclusion and precarisation (Nyssens, 1997).

becomes a structural characteristic of contemporary capitalist societies. The promise of full employment declines. Several authors have documented this phenomenon in Argentina. In this country, the neoliberalisation of the economy prompted the exclusion of a substantial number of workers from the formal labour market, and with it, basic social rights associated with the welfare state model (Basualdo, 2006; Danani & Hintze, 2011; Kessler & Di Virgilio, 2008; Merklen, 2010; Palomino, 2005). During the 1990s, unemployment figures surged in the country, sparking massive social protests, popular assemblies, mutual aid networks, and factory takeovers by workers (Coraggio & Arroyo, 2009; Dinerstein, 2007; Svampa & Pereyra, 2009). This set the stage for the development of popular economies, with workers that use their own skills and tools and do not employ others (Curcio et al., 2011).

To understand this phenomenon, Quijano (2008) poses the question: what can workers do when they cannot find employment? They must find a way to live, and the popular economy is as an answer to this question. Quijano points out the need to recognise that the concept of labour, in general, cannot be limited to the framework of wage employment. This way of thinking, the author poses, reflects a Eurocentric perspective that fails to acknowledge the diverse forms of labour that exist in regions like Latin America. The popular economy presents an alternative approach to organising work that transcends the notion of employment, understood as a form of dependent work with a distinction between employers and employees.

Popular economy is an alternative economic form whose focus is not the reproduction of capital, but labour for life reproduction. Although these experiences are not necessarily against capitalism as a whole, participants advocate for their self-organisation and freedom against the alienation of working under dependency formats, and being able to participate with peers on projects that they feel are their own (Hintze, 2018; Hintze & Vázquez, 2011). Their aim is not to be included in classic employment modalities, but to build another economy with different principles and forms of organisation. This includes workers controlling the productive process by themselves, following alternative cooperative and solidarity values (Coraggio & Loritz, 2022).

It is important to note here that the concept of popular used in this thesis should not be confused with the more frequent use within the English-speaking world, which indicates a phenomenon that is involving many people, regardless of their concrete situation. Instead, the popular in popular economy is related to the idea of *pueblo*, which is a political category that denote those who are oppressed, excluded, and subordinated in the capitalist system (Coraggio & Loritz, 2022). Following Vilas (2018), the notion of *pueblo* can be understood in relation to the position of subjects within the social structure. Rather than being a demographic category, *pueblo* refers to the "collective political subject" that is "in conflictive differentiation with respect to the power that exploits, oppresses or represses" (Vilas, 2018, p.77). It is, primarily, a political category that is intertwined, in my case studies, with the subjectivity of participants that identify themselves as land workers and producers.

The popular economy is not equivalent to the informal sector. Gago et al. (2018) define the concept of popular economy as practices that blur the boundaries between the formal and the informal. Popular economy initiatives do not categorically fit into one of the poles of the divide between formal and informal. As mentioned, these are self-organised collective practices that are not under the format of employer-employee relations. But this does not mean that they are informal. The notion of informality refers to economic activities carried out by the poor, in disorganised ways and outside of legal frameworks (Gago et al., 2018). The popular economy does not happen outside of state influence. Rather, the state is part, to a lesser or greater extent, of the broader mosaic of participants who collaborate. For example, at the national level, the popular economy is recognised by the state, which provides a Complementary Social Salary to the workers (Felder & Patroni, 2018). Additionally, these practices are organised collectively. Considering the association of workers into labour union movements is central for understanding this phenomenon. Moreover, their practices take place in concrete spaces, with particular ways to organise work routines. While other kinds of popular economy experiences could be thought of as closer to the notion of informality (Tovar, 2018), the cases I study in this thesis are characterised by their collective organisation and a degree of state recognition. Thus, the notion of popular economy goes beyond the binary formal-informal.

Unlike informal economy, the concept of popular economy highlights the political character of the practices. Popular economy extends beyond the aim of survival. This thesis shows that participants question dominant production modes, such as the primacy of the agribusiness model, with practices that seek social inclusion and environmental regeneration.

Popular economy is a political category (Fernández Álvarez, 2019, 2020), dependent on the mobilisation of participants who use this notion as a form of subjectification and collective organisation. Regarding this, a milestone in the organisational process of this sector as a labour union was the creation in 2011 of the CTEP, which was later renamed UTEP, bringing together several social organisations, including the MTE[3] and the Evita Movement (*Movimiento Evita*)[4]. By advocating their own identity as workers of a new sector, participants are able to detach themselves from the idea that unemployment is a transitory phase (Natalucci & Mate, 2023). Instead, popular economy is a phenomenon that is now part of the socio-political and economic landscape of the country, comprising workers that "invent" their own job. The notion of "invention" (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014) to refer to the creativity of these actors to find alternative ways to make a living is frequently used by the popular economy movements to define their activities.

As mentioned previously, the neoliberalisation processes in Argentina and Latin America led to an increasing process of exclusion of large segments of the working population from access to employment and social benefits. By the late 1990s, several movements of unemployed workers emerged as a result of this crisis. The rise in social protest in Argentina reached a significant milestone in 2001. During this crisis, alternative organisational forms emerged, seeking to meet basic needs at the neighbourhood level (Merklen, 2010; Quirós, 2011). Additionally, groups of workers who had lost their jobs began to occupy the

[3] The MTE emerged in 2002, in the midst of the country's socio-economic and political crisis, to demand in favour of rights for waste pickers in the city of Buenos Aires. Waste picking is an economic activity that had become widespread during those years (Villanova, 2014).

[4] The Evita Movement emerged in the late 1990s in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, as Movement of Unemployed Workers "Evita" (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados "Evita"*) (MTD Evita) in honour of the historical Peronist movement leader. Over the years. the organisation became directly involved in the elaboration and implementation of government policies for promoting cooperative forms of labour at the neighbourhood scale, and also integrating members of the organisation into governmental positions (Longa, 2019b).

bankrupt factories where they had worked, reclaiming them through self-management processes (Coraggio & Arroyo, 2009; Rebón, 2005; Vieta, 2010). These workers, who devised their own means of work and survival during the crisis, laid the groundwork for what would later evolve into the organised popular economy. They indicate that there are alternative labour formats beyond the traditional employment under the authority of an employer.

The emergence of 'post-neoliberal' governments in Latin America had its expression in Argentina with the governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández from 2003 to 2015. This period marked a process of economic and labour growth, alongside the development of labour unions as forms of workers' organisation. Labour unions had previously experienced a decline due to the impacts of deindustrialisation and flexibilisation policies over the preceding decades (Palomino, 2005). Following this crisis, a phenomenon known as "union revitalisation" (Senén González & Haidar, 2009), "union resurgence" (Etchemendy & Collier, 2007) o 'return of the trade unions' (Atzeni & Grigera, 2019) took place, where unions regained their strength, evidenced by a rise in worker membership and the resurgence of collective bargaining which led to wage increases and improved social benefits. The return of collective bargaining between employers and workers to regulate working conditions marked a milestone in this period.

However, the economic recovery experienced during this period did not eliminate the issue of exclusion, and did not lead to full employment. Instead, the phenomenon of the heterogeneous popular economy stood up, with workers that create their own jobs to survive. This phenomenon was not a temporary occurrence, destined to eventually be integrated into traditional forms of employment (Abal Medina, 2016). These workers do not find a space of representation in traditional labour unions, which primarily focus on the dynamic of collective bargaining with employers and the state. But this does not mean that they cannot assert their identity as workers. The concept of work extends beyond just wage employment (Quijano, 2008). The new labour unions of the

popular economy arise to support and represent this emerging class of workers, filling the gap left by traditional unions[5].

This development highlights the significant role that labour union organisation has historically played in Argentina. In this country, unions are "the working-class organisational form par excellence" (Atzeni & Grigera, 2019, p. 867). The popular economy labour unions build their organisational identity rooted in the historical narratives of the Argentine working class (Sorroche & Schejter, 2021). By organising as labour unions, they can gain institutional recognition by the state, be acknowledged as workers (Natalucci & Mate, 2023), and secure rights such as the Complementary Social Salary (Felder & Patroni, 2018). At the same time, they continue to identify as movements due to their origins in the unemployed movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s. They integrate both union and movement traditions.

After 2015, popular economy becomes a more generally recognised concept in the literature as well as in political debates, as distinct to others such as the unemployed or the informal sector (Felder & Patroni, 2018). This is due to the increasing levels of mobilisation that the social movements that represent this economic sector demonstrated after the appointment of Mauricio Macri as President, in order to obtain institutional recognition of the sector and support from public policies (Coraggio & Loritz, 2022; Larsen & Capparelli, 2021; Natalucci et al., 2023; Niedzwiecki & Pribble, 2017; Vommaro & Gené, 2017).

It was calculated that over four million people in Argentina, 33% of the active workforce, were part of the popular economy sector in the second half of 2020 (Fernández Álvarez et al., 2021). Estimations made by activists of the UTEP using information from the Argentine Integrated Pension System (*Sistema Integrado Previsional Argentino*, SIPA) consider that this number could be closer to nine million (Grabois, 2022). Due to the diversity and complexity of this phenomenon, customary statistical methods used in the country have trouble providing accurate measurements.

[5] Despite the differences with traditional labour unions, popular economy movements engage in dialogue with them, and some even consider the possibility of joining the major General Confederation of Labour (*Confederación General del Trabajo*, CGT) (Natalucci & Mate, 2023).

Popular economy is a diverse and heterogeneous economic sector. Within this broader universe, there are agricultural producers who find themselves in a precarious situation given their lack of access to land for production. One of the strategies of the organised participants of the popular economy is to collectively set workplaces in public spaces, areas which often have been left in a state of neglect or misuse, and that they aim to rebuild. In this thesis, I focus my view on this type of experiences, that have yet to be fully explored by the literature.

These workers aim to find a space to work, and they also engage in alternative forms of producing food with a socio-environmental commitment. This is the agroecological approach, a way of producing food that seeks to preserve and protect biodiversity and the environment (Altieri & Nicholls, 2008). In tandem with the notion of agroecology, the notion of food sovereignty is advocated by these movements as a response to the extractivist model. Food sovereignty is defined as the right of peoples to define their own agricultural and food policy, as well as accessing enough healthy, culturally appropriate, and ecologically produced food. It is characterised as a collective right, and it is dependent on the protection of land, water, air, and other common goods against their privatisation (García Guerreiro & Wahren, 2023). Food sovereignty also depends on the producers' wellbeing. Workers face several challenges in producing food: their health can be damaged, and their living and working conditions are often inadequate. Recovering abandoned public spaces and producing with agroecological methods is proposed by these movements as a solution for these challenges.

The agroecological perspective also aims to recover degraded lands as well as defend these lands against the extractive and displacement strategies of the agribusiness model (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). The consolidation of the agribusiness model during the 1990s led to an increasing land concentration process, with larger farms expanding their occupied area and the smaller, decreasing (Barbetta, 2014). This happens in a country that did not experience a land reform process: debates on land reform in Latin America did not have a major impact in Argentinian policies (Lázzaro, 2017). The agribusiness model is associated mainly to the monoculture-oriented production of transgenic soybeans for exportation on the international market. This benefits land-leasing

investment funds, transgenic seed and agrochemical companies, and corporations that arrange the contracts for large-scale production (Barri & Wahren, 2010). The hegemony of the agribusiness model[6] brings up problems about land use in the country. Environmental problems arise out of the intensive use of natural resources and the pollution and destruction of native forests, water courses, and the soil. In addition, there are violent processes of dispossession, eviction, and displacement of rural populations that migrate to the cities (Barbetta, 2014; Cáceres, 2015).

Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2014) analyse the notion of food sovereignty as a framework for collective action, disseminated internationally by the organisation *Vía Campesina*. Within this framework, the notion of agribusiness plays a significant role. Collective action frames are sets of ideas that movements have to construct meanings about the issues that are important to them and to encourage participation (Gamson, 1995). Following this, the notion of agribusiness refers to the agroextractivist model prevalent in Latin America, which Giraldo (2015) defines as a mechanism of modern capitalism to control nature, privatise and appropriate lands. Participants in my case studies frequently use the term agribusiness, and as part of this collective action frame, it allows them to recognise different political positions and engage in a symbolic dispute over the prevailing model of economic development in Argentina.

Thus, the notion of agribusiness highlights the political distinction made by the actors between the approach of food sovereignty and the exclusionary, extractivist model of economic production associated with agribusiness. Food sovereignty presents an alternative to the neoliberal agricultural model, because it highlights the right of peoples to produce their own food within their territories, prioritises local economies, democratises land access, and prevents the privatisation of genetic resources, biodiversity and cultural legacies (Desmarais, 2008; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014).

[6] The agricultural production sector in Argentina is diverse, with various associations representing different interests. However, as Gras and Hernández (2016) argue, the agribusiness model has become hegemonic, shaped by the articulation of interests and collaboration of international and national actors. The authors examine how the global agribusiness logic, propelled by large transnational corporations, established in the country by generating consensus and forming alliances with local actors, ultimately becoming hegemonic.

As a reaction to the hegemony of the agribusiness model in Argentina, there are two popular economy movements of agricultural workers that gained relevance on the public agenda after 2015 with their innovative forms of protest for land access[7]. These are the UTT and the Rural branch of the MTE, which belongs to the broader UTEP. These protests surged as a form of confronting national government policies that were beneficial to large agricultural producers in detriment of smaller ones (Acero Lagomarsino, 2021; Acero Lagomarsino & Mosca, 2023). For instance, the UTT arranges *verdurazos*, a form of protest where they donate vegetables produced by them to passersby near the *Plaza de Mayo* or the National Congress Square. These events made them more widely recognised, and this form of collective action is part of their usual repertoire. Both movements have different strategies to advocate for land access. First, both presented law proposals to provide land for workers that do not own any, aiming to get support from public funds for loans (Jasinski et al., 2022)[8]. They also set up collective agroecological workplaces, by getting support and negotiating with state agencies, or directly occupying vacant idle lands.

The workplace initiatives that I study in this thesis are created by these movements. In the site located in the Entre Ríos province, participants of the UTT co-construct, with the support of the municipal government, a farm and a nature reserve. The municipal government promotes a policy called Plan of Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food, which supports agroecology and food sovereignty in opposition to the use of polluting substances for food production. In the case located in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, members of the Rural MTE lead a vegetable garden and native plants production initiative, also on public land, where other participants from the Evita Movement, both members

[7] The struggle for land rights has a longer historical background in Argentina, however never crystallising in an effective land reform. Following Barbetta and Domínguez (2016), it grew as a socially problematised issue in the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of widespread peasant mobilisations across the continent and the intensity of the debates on agrarian reforms. During these decades, the so-called Agrarian and Peasant Leagues (*Ligas Agrarias y Campesinas*) were formed in the country, demanding access to land and land tenure rights. They denounced the concentration of land in large estates and monopolies, and opposed the motto 'land for those who work it' (*tierra para quien la trabaja*). They understood that land could not be a commodity to generate income for a few large landowners, but a good that should be available to the workers. This motto is still present in activist mobilisations, indicating the relevance of the association between land and work for the movements.

[8] In addition, organisations such as the Indigenous-Peasant National Movement (*Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indígena*, MNCI) have presented law proposals for the recognition and protection of the communal ownership of land for peasant and indigenous families (Barbetta, 2014; Barbetta & Domínguez, 2016).

of the common UTEP, also participate. In the latter case, workers do not receive direct support from the municipal government, and manage the space themselves, with some help of funds from national government programmes. By describing and analysing both of these cases in their similarities and particularities, I aim to shed light on the forms of publicness that they create, showing the plurality of actors involved and the motivations they have for participating.

It is important to note that throughout this thesis, I do not explicitly mention the name of the places where the sites are located, in order to reduce the potential identification of research participants.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organised around seven chapters that examine the question of the construction of publicness in agroecological workplaces of the popular economy.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on municipalism, remunicipalisation, and public spaces; social and popular economy; and agroecology and urban agriculture and gardening experiences. Many valuable insights can be found within these bodies of literature to establish a basis for conceptualising publicness in this thesis. First, it can be seen how local public spaces are a significant and fertile arena for social engagement and political participation in a broad sense, and particularly in bringing derelict and vacant spaces back to life. Second, I understand the kind of economic initiatives studied in my research as part of the popular economy movement, formed by workers who create ways of making a living beyond traditional employment schemes in the market, and organise into labour unions to defend their rights. Third, conceptualising the kind of activities they perform as examples of a wider agroecological movement, that aim to counteract the prevalence of the agribusiness model with a different method of production and with the defence of the right of producers to land access. The intersection of these broad bodies of literature reveals a novel area to be explored in search for the coordinates for publicness: local public spaces converted into workplaces for agroecological initiatives of the popular economy sector.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, detailing how I aim to comprehend the worlds of meaning created by participants that take part in these public initiatives. I call this approach 'situated', as I seek to understand publicness from the qualitative study of localised and spatially grounded experiences, using *in situ* methods of inquiry. I have chosen two case studies, characterised by the participation of two major popular economy movements that support the agroecological approach in Argentina, but with divergent levels and forms of state support. I present the broader context and recent history of popular economy and agroecology in Argentina, so that to understand where they come from. The primary method was semi-structured interviews to participants that work in these spaces, as well as the immediate networks of proximity, which includes NGOs, volunteers, government officials, and environmental experts. Interviews were guided by a series of broad themes which include: participants' descriptions of the initiatives, its aims, causes and demands, the relationships between different actors, the forms of organisation and participation, the transformations over time, the relation to the political and geographical context, the identification of supporters and oppositions, and the activities developed. From the coding and analysis of the information collected during the fieldwork, I define three main dimensions for explaining the form that publicness takes in these case studies, which feed into the structuring of the following empirical chapters.

The findings and discussions are presented in Chapters 4 to 6. Chapter 4 explores how publicness in these initiatives is constructed by a plural ensemble of actors, that act and collaborate in order to give life to the spatial settings. I also show that this notion of plurality does not entail homogeneity. The different actors that participate in these initiatives, namely, labour union movements, state institutions, socio-environmental activists and NGOs, do not merge within each other and even can have different visions in regard to how should the initiatives be implemented. Particularly, labour union movements can have different degrees of influence over the management of the spaces, depending on the level and type of support obtained by state institutions, particularly the municipal government. Still, obtaining some degree of state support is a relevant factor for building these workplaces. Thus, it is not a form of publicness against the state,

rather one that includes it but at the same time recognises that it is not enough, and sometimes not even the main force creating these local public spaces.

In Chapter 5, I show the centrality of labour and the subjectification as workers and producers of participants that actively engage in the everyday life of the workplaces. In contrast to other Latin American countries where the forms of subjectification as peasants and peasant-indigenous are fundamental for understanding the forms of organisation around agroecology, in the Argentinian cases studied in this thesis, the forms of subjectification around work and the productive role of the participants are the ones that predominate. Overall, the subjectivity as workers and producers, and the collective organisation around labour, continues to be central for understanding the political dynamics of social mobilisation and the relationship between state and society in Argentina. This is happening even if the ways by which social actors become workers differ from the former working-class ideal type, which is not predominant after the crisis of the wage society model.

Chapter 6 addresses how participants refer to the construction of these workplaces as tied to the quest of having a proper space for production. There, workers spend a large part of their time building and bringing these formerly rundown spaces to life. They are motivated both by making a living as well as to a broader socio-environmental approach on how to produce and transform the spaces in an inclusive direction, when the environment is understood as existing with humans rather than despite them. This particular configuration on how to produce a green public space which is inclusive of the working-class leads to conflicts with other inhabitants of the localities where they are situated. This reveals also how public spaces are sites of dispute over who has the right to produce and use the sites, with clashing approaches on how to build these public green geographies.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the thesis, summarizing key findings and opening up further inquiries for future research. I restate how these cases reveal that publicness can be constructed as a plural, participatory, labour-led spatiality, oriented by socio-environmental and productive aims. I understand from these findings that the construction of public space is not neutral: by researching who, how, and why it is constructed, it can be seen that its institution is a political

act. Recovering the political dimension of public spaces also reveals that these are more than mere physical landscapes. How these spaces could evolve in the following years would also depend on if and how the ensemble of actors that constitute them survives and adapt to new political scenarios.

Chapter 2 Discussions for studying popular economy and agroecological initiatives

2.1 Introduction

In the global context of neoliberalism as the dominant political and economic project, there are numerous cases at the local scale in which actors seek to counteract, oppose, and redefine this operating logic, by reappealing to the relevance of public initiatives and spaces. Neoliberalisation processes subsist in an "ongoing state of contested reconstruction" (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 246). Neoliberalism can be defined as an organising rationality of the conduct of social actors that establishes competition among individuals as a normative behaviour and a way of governing their lives (Dardot & Laval, 2013). Public assets and spaces are privatised under the notion that competition between private shareholders is more effective, in principle, than public regulation. Privatisation ends up spreading to many realms of social life, freeing the state from its former roles and obligations in social protection. The neoliberal paradigm became hegemonic after the global crisis of capitalism in the 1970s, and consolidated its position in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Harvey, 2005).

In Latin America, neoliberalisation processes have led to several harmful effects such as increased unemployment, rising inequality, and the growth of extractivist economies, which deepen Latin America's dependent role as a supplier of raw materials for the world economy (Gwynne & Kay, 2004; Svampa, 2019). In the Argentinian recent history, the privatisation of former public companies and the general deregulation of the economy led to cyclical crises as well as to the growth of social protests and mobilisations. This contributed in the long term to the emergence of the popular economy as a sector and a form of labour union organisation. Within the popular economy, several initiatives that advocate for the benefits of agroecological practices aim to present an alternative to the dominating extractive economies, from a socio-environmental perspective. Two initiatives of this kind are the focus of this thesis.

Considering this broader context, the aim of this literature review chapter is to critically evaluate the state of research on the construction of publicness and public spaces at the local scale, and its relation to the growing worldwide

phenomena of popular economy and agroecological movements, with a focus on the Argentinian experiences.

The literature review is presented in a thematic manner. My research, focused on the construction of publicness, develops a dialogue between several themes and bodies of literature, each with their own traditions, discussions, and findings. I group these bodies of literature in three main sections that configure this chapter. After this introduction, Section 2.2 addresses the research that covers disputes and discussions around publicness at the local scale, which help me highlight the relevance of the local scale as a political arena on its own right. Section 2.3 discusses social economy and popular economy as an emergent social phenomenon that challenges traditional conceptualisations of the labour force and its organisational forms. It brings to the fore the changing character of labour, and its current relevance. This background enables me to progress my argument that these new labour movements are key actors for constructing publicness with workplaces in public spaces. Then, Section 2.4 examines the themes of agroecology, urban agriculture and gardening initiatives. This literature assists in the comprehension of these experiences in their political and activist dimension, the network of actors involved in their advocacy, and how these movements and groups can contest neoliberal dynamics of privatisation and corporate land grabbing, agro-extractivism, and revert the ruined and neglected status of urban spaces. Finally, the conclusion provides a brief synthesis of the challenges and opportunities identified in the literature for my research.

2.2 Disputes for the public at the local scale

I begin with the contribution of literature concerned with the defence, reclamation, and disputes around the significance of publicness and public spaces at the local scale, which arise as an alternative to the expansion of privatisation processes. An array of studies has located emerging forms of defending and claiming for public areas and spaces at the local scale. In this thesis, I refer to three main groups of studies in this regard, which provides my research with key foundations to approach the question on the construction of publicness. First, in Subsection 2.2.1 I review the literature on municipalism. Significantly, this literature has contributed to a more helpful understanding of

the local and municipal scale not as a lower or constrained kind of politics, but as a fertile arena for political action and dispute, and the unfolding of modes of political agency. Then, in Subsection 2.2.2, I refer to the literature on remunicipalisation processes, which is connected to the latter. It has the benefits of reconsidering the role of the state as key for examining reclaims for publicness at the local scale, which contrastingly, the studies on municipalism tend to disregard. Finally for this section, in 2.2.3, I engage with literature that specifically enhances my analysis by helping to understand publicness in its spatial and situated coordinates. After that, in the following Section 2.3, I include discussions about social economy and popular economy, which help to specify which kind of spatiality I am dealing with in my research: a workplace.

2.2.1 Municipalist politics and the commons

Municipalism is a notion used for describing the centrality and vitality of political agency at the municipal level. It defends the democratic autonomy (Thompson, 2020) of local populations to decide on political issues and not be considered as subpar compared to politics from the national or central level. At the same time, it aims for a democratisation of power and politics through the flourishment of citizenship participation (Roth, 2019) and self-government (Cumbers & Paul, 2020). Municipalist thinking is influenced by the works of activist and philosopher Murray Bookchin, as well as a new generation of researchers who are interested in recent municipalist experiences around the world, prominently Barcelona (Angel, 2020; Cumbers & Paul, 2020; Janoschka & Mota, 2020; Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2020). Some of the central tenets of municipalism include a criticism of centralism and nation-based state power, the quest for a democratisation of politics with more participation and proximity dynamics, and the support of solidarity and mutual-aid forms of economic management.

Municipalist politics have emerged as a local response to the social fractures generated by neoliberalisation processes and austerity policies (Blanco et al., 2020; Janoschka & Mota, 2020). It aspires to democratise urban political economies (Thompson, 2020), and building environmental resistances (Durand Folco, 2016). It does so by promoting a politics of proximity, of furthering connections between the inhabitants of the cities (Roth et al., 2023; Russell,

2019), and imagining new institutional formations with non-state urban actors and networks of assemblies (Thompson, 2020) as well as promoting cooperative organisations acting in a decentralised, bottom-up, and horizontal way (Roth, 2019). Specifically, Morley and Morgan (2021) have suggested that new municipalist policies can stimulate the provision of sustainable food for the local population.

This approach is very productive to understand the municipal as a political locus in itself, particularly by seeing the political dimension of local alternative economies. Despite this, from my perspective, there are some considerations in municipalist theories that emerge as problematic for understanding the empirical evidence that this thesis presents.

First, this literature mostly refers to the notion of commons or *lo común/comunes* in Spanish, instead of public. Bookchin advocates for means of production to be communal, and managed democratically, "under the purview of the local assembly, which decides how it will function to meet the interests of the community as a whole" (2005, p. 19). By communalising resources, citizens recover their possession and management. The commons are then defined as the reclaimed and democratically managed shared goods, guided by principles such as solidarity, reciprocity, mutual support, and social responsibility (Aguiló Bonet & Sabariego, 2019; Blanco et al., 2018). Commons are managed by the local community without interference of the state or private property (Durand Folco, 2016).

Some studies have created a novel concept, that of "public-commons partnerships", to refer to municipalist forms of collaboration between state and civil actors in local public administrations (Pera & Bussu, 2024; Russell et al., 2023). While they have successfully identified the existence of collaborative and not just the contesting relations between social movements or communities and the state, this concept potentially adds unnecessary complexity for explaining the phenomenon. This is because it is not clear why these studies have decided to exclude social movements and other civil actors from the conceptualisation of public, to only equate it to the state. This may be due to the opposition that municipalist theories make between municipal politics as a deliberative and participatory arena and the art of statecraft (Bookchin, 1991), and their effort

to move “beyond” (Russell, 2019) and even “against” (Durand Folco, 2017) the state. It has even been argued that municipalism “abandons making rights claims to the state in favour of building parallel urban institutions capable of meeting needs beyond” it (Thompson, 2020, p. 9). The applicability of this argument to the cases that I research is limited. These two strategies, claiming to the state and building parallel spaces, are not mutually exclusive for a conceptualisation of publicness.

This shortcoming highlights the need for a different approach. Another suggestion is made by Bianchi (2023) with the concept of “common-state institutions” instead of “public-commons”, rightly avoiding the statalised conception of the public. However, it is less clear what the fuzziness of the concept of commons (Cumbers, 2015) and its emphasis on a guiding set of principles and values can add to the situated understanding of my case studies, beyond what the notion of public itself can offer. There is some ambiguity in the notion of “common-state” that could contribute to the misinterpretation of the commons as something pre-constituted before engaging with state institutions. Thus, I believe that by keeping the notion of public it can be observed how it is co-constituted by a plurality of actors, including but not limited to the state.

As noted by Cumbers (2015), the notion of commons is used an alternative to criticise both state and capitalist economic forms. However, in practice, the state continues to be important for reclaiming the public realm for alternative economic initiatives. A more fecund perspective entails seeing “state and grassroots civil society as part of inter-mingled, dynamic and ongoing relationships” (Cumbers, 2015, p. 70), and to engage in “concrete analysis” of actual cases (2015, p. 71), trying to grasp its complexity given a determined socio-historical and geographical context.

In this respect, analyses departing from Latin American municipalist experiences have been more prone to recognise the relevance of state actions and policies, when adapted to the prolonged dissent coming from social mobilisation. Baiocchi’s (2018) analysis emphasises the importance of understanding the connections between social movements and state institutions through the concept of popular sovereignty. He argues that strong state institutions, coupled with the energy of social movements, are essential for democratising society and

generating popular sovereignty. Baiocchi recognises that the structural social transformations needed to address significant problems of our times, such as the privatisation of natural resources and lands, or extensive deforestation, require state action and exceed the capacities of social movements alone. Wampler's (2012) study on participatory institutions in local governments in Brazil illustrates how social organisations can engage with the state and become actively involved in public life, leading to improvements in public infrastructure and social welfare. All in all, by considering Latin American experiences in the analysis, it can be clearly observed the link between social movements and the state, and rethink municipalism from a perspective that does not exclude the latter from the equation.

Along these lines, recently, Kip and van Dyk (2024) have reexamined the Barcelona new municipalist experience and repositioned the notion of the public in this literature. They define it as the social engagement around collectively valuable resources. Research can locate social movements' efforts to reclaim the public from its monopolisation by the elites, without diminishing the state or misunderstanding it as a monolithic bloc (Kip & van Dyk, 2024)[9].

In Latin America there are experiences where local public policies have shown municipalist and autonomous characteristics. Goldfrank and Schrank (2009) examine what they refer to as "municipal socialism", highlighting how municipal governments can implement innovative public policies that focus on income distribution and encourage social participation in the city budget. The authors argue that these local policies often precede similar initiatives at the national level, which indicates that municipalities do not merely replicate national decisions but also serve as policy creators. Avritzer's (2010) analysis of the expansion of participatory budgeting in Brazil further supports the idea that municipal public policies can demonstrate a creative capacity, rather than simply reproducing what is decided at the national level.

[9] In accordance to this pluralistic use of the category of public opted by my research, I neither follow theorisations made by authors studying urban agriculture and community gardening initiatives, which categorise them as "actually existing commons" (Eizenberg, 2012a), "everyday commoning" sites (Hanmer, 2021) or "commons-in-the-making" (Ginn & Ascensão, 2018).

Another aspect which is less useful for understanding the specific cases that I analyse is the focus on the notion of citizenship to define the political actor of municipalist initiatives. Bookchin (2005) imagines the municipalist polis as a gathering of citizens directly governing the city, meeting face-to-face in the agora to discuss and decide on their common matters. As my thesis deals with workplaces as public spaces, this notion does not fully align with participants' subjectivities. Particularly, Bookchin mentions that having "workers' committees and confederal economic councils as the locus of social authority" would entail a form of "economic determinism" that bypasses popular institutions outside of the economic realm (Bookchin, 2005, p. 12). Instead, he prefers the category of citizens because it lets him think of actors "freed of their particularistic identity as workers" (2005, p. 20), associating the worker subjectivity to the particular (hence, private) and not the general (hence, public) interest of the society. I consider that this strict separation between the political and the economic realm, where the latter is not conceived of as a sphere with political potential, is not useful. Arguably, this conceptualisation diminishes the potential of municipalist theories to bring back the relevance of political analysis to the realm of the local sphere. It also seems reductionist of the actual experience of workers' organisations and the public and political dimension of their practices, as I explain throughout the thesis. Indeed, workers as collective actors need to be seen in their potential in municipalist participatory projects, something that this literature should not omit.

In what follows, I refer to a related literature field, which specifically deals with the phenomenon of remunicipalisation. This field emerges as promising to rediscover the notion of public for the analysis of my cases.

2.2.2 Remunicipalisation and the return to the public

As part of the broader terrain of "actually existing municipalisms" (Cumbers & Paul, 2020) remunicipalisation strategies have surfaced in cities across the world. Remunicipalisations involve processes of deprivatisation, taking formerly privatised assets back into public ownership. These are new and various models of local public ownership that emerged mostly as a reaction to the failure of private companies to address various problems and contradictions in delivering services (Cumbers, 2013; Cumbers & Becker, 2018; Cumbers & Paul, 2022;

Kishimoto et al., 2020). Overall, remunicipalisations challenge the idea that the private is invariably preferable to the public by repoliticising urban utilities (Becker et al., 2015).

Remunicipalisations show that the state remains a “fruitful terrain of struggle” (Angel, 2017, p. 566) for social movements and activist campaigns pushing for the defence of publicness. They reposition and visibilise the agency of social movements on policies and urban governance (Becker et al., 2016). Needless to say, this trend is not a return to centralised state ownership. Remunicipalisations represent “a break from the top-down forms of public ownership associated with the post-war nationalisations” (Featherstone et al., 2020, p. 5). Studies on remunicipalisation show that the question about the public at the local scale is not outdated, and that the state may have a role as well as the participation of society to build the idea of the public. To further explore this topic, I agree with Cumbers and McMaster’s (2012) proposal of trascending the simple definition of publicness associated with centralised planning and state bureaucracy, to a more open idea of the public where participation of the society in economic decision making matters. The idea of public can then be understood to include the participation of a plurality of actors. In fact, some remunicipalisation processes include the implementation of participatory democratic mechanisms such as workers on the board and open assemblies (Angel, 2017). This conceptualisation of public as participatory helps to provide a foundation to my arguments regarding the cases I study.

Remunicipalisations are dynamic, variegated, and geographically uneven (Cumbers & Paul, 2022). Some remunicipalisation processes are initiated within the state, from above, when governments (even across the political spectrum) question the suitability of privatisations, and, in other cases, arise from contentious protests, mobilisations and citizen advocacy groups against privatisation and its outcomes (Becker et al., 2015; Cumbers & Paul, 2022; Lobina, 2017). The phenomenon is far from being homogeneous with respect to its motivations, rationales, and ideological agendas. While some actors embrace a counter-hegemonic paradigm, be it towards a community-driven and progressive economy, others may choose to remunicipalise for other reasons,

even in municipalities permeated by anti-tax sentiments (Aldag et al., 2019; McDonald, 2018).

The definition of remunicipalisation can accurately describe some of the ways in which localities can reclaim public ownership. In spite of this, it is better equipped to deal with cases that involve specific companies. It is easier to identify such cases in the field of public services, particularly water and energy (Cumbers, 2013; Cumbers & Paul, 2022), where there is a legal "contract reversal" process (Bel et al., 2018; Clifton et al., 2019) with easily identifiable and formalised groups of actors. Though, these specific kind of cases at the municipal level are scarce in Argentina. There was a trend of service deprivatisation cases in the country during the 2000s, but these were led by the national state in a centralised and top-down manner (Colbert, 2017; Cumbers & Paul, 2022; Rocca, 2014), better described by the concept of renationalisation.

However, this does not mean that deprivatisation processes at the local level beyond the strict definition of remunicipalisation are not happening. For that reason, based on my case studies, I suggest understanding deprivatisation from a spatial point of view, rather than focusing on concrete formalised companies. That is, questioning how can concrete local spaces be deprivatised. In order to do that, studies on local public spaces can help introduce this geographical approach for my analysis.

2.2.3 Approaching public spaces as inclusive and participatory places

Insights from a wide and well-established array of studies on public spaces at the local scale are helpful to clarify which kind of publicness I am dealing with in my study, by bringing the attention to its spatial dimensions. I explore concrete places where my cases unfold, materialised geographies where social relations take place. Literature on public spaces helps drawing the attention to the social dynamics, relations between actors, forms of circulation, activities, temporalities, symbolisms and meanings attached to these places (A. Clark et al., 2009; S. Low, 1997; Madanipour, 1999, 2010). That is, an idea of space not as a landscape, and neither as something absolute, timeless, and unchanging, but as a permanent construction, with actions and social transformations over

time, and relational, with meanings created by the actors who navigate and construct it (Harvey, 2012).

When thinking about what constitutes the publicness of public spaces, research has discussed which criteria and principles are to be incorporated into the analysis. Centrally, the notion of inclusion is one of the criteria mentioned. Low, Taplin and Scheld (2005) propose to think, when analysing these spaces, does all people feel welcome to go there? They observe that, while in principle a public space can be accessible to everyone, in practice it may only be the middle-class visitor the one that feels welcomed. Many studies have analysed different aspects of inclusiveness. For instance, Holland et al. (2007) reflect on interactions between different people on the basis of their age, gender, ethnicity, and other socio-economic characteristics, considering how community cohesion can be promoted. Particularly, Peters and de Haan (2011) study inter-ethnic interactions and multiculturalism in the everyday. Paulos and Goodman (2004) analyse interactions between what they call "familiar strangers" in public settings and how these can encourage forms of solidarity. L'Aoustet and Griffet (2004) concentrate on forms of peer-socialisation between young people as well as inter-generational interactions. Moore and Cosco (2007) examine how space design can support the inclusion of disenfranchised groups, for example, people with disabilities or children, and in the same vein, Sugiyama and Ward Thompson (2007) explore how designs can help older people to improve their quality of life.

More broadly, Shaftoe (2012) argues that public spaces need to foster conviviality, becoming places where diverse people can interact, gather, and celebrate. For that reason, Latham and Layton (2019) suggest thinking of public spaces as "social infrastructure" for people to have the possibility to be out amongst others and connect. In turn, Amin (2008) theorises on the civic dimension of these spaces: how can they become places for public encounter, political participation and deliberation. The author observes their potential as spaces for increasing people's "disposition towards the other" (2008, p. 6), non-hierarchical relations and diversity. Essentially, this author asserts that the success of public spaces depends on the participation from people from diverse groups. Tonnelat (2010) also ties this with the idea of public sphere as the need

of having places of conversation, debate, and democratic participation. In the same vein, Miller (2007) asserts that in order to develop a democratically active public life and multiple public spheres, public spaces are a key component, and encourages to question how public spaces are related to the practice of democracy.

Researchers also indicate that practices such as privatisation, excessive policing and surveillance, abandonment, neglect, or even the calls for their historic preservation can exclude people, reduce the vitality of public spaces, and minimize democratic action (Amin, 2008; S. Low et al., 2005; Madanipour, 1999; Shaftoe, 2012; Tonnelat, 2010). In order to secure public spaces, urban policies resort to displace rather than solve social problems, excluding for instance teenagers or the homeless from accessing by not considering them legitimate users (Atkinson, 2003). In the same vein, policies of "beautification" of green spaces can dispossess low-income communities from lands and spaces of socialisation for the benefit of the privileged middle and upper classes (Anguelovski et al., 2019). When such practices exist, it creates unwelcoming atmospheres in the cities, increasing feelings of fear towards the "others" (S. Low et al., 2005).

In this thesis, I focus on a particular aspect of inclusiveness which is the one related to social class and the subjectivity of workers. I do so by analysing how participants themselves raise this question about being included as legitimate creators of the public space in the cities, understanding this as a claim for the right to the city, which in my cases is tied to their socio-environmental advocacy.

Another key theme in the literature on public spaces is its conflictive and contentious dimension, which, along with the question of inclusiveness, highlights their political aspect. The presence, participation, and protest carried out by social movements there constitute these places as "spatialities of struggle" in contexts affected by austerity politics (Arampatzi, 2017). Public spaces then can become places of political expression and even subversion (Bodnar, 2015), igniting intense debates over the right to the city. This is, as Mitchell (2003) argues, because this right to inhabit the city needs to be battled for by the groups who tend to be denied of their access to the public realm. To

be part of and be represented in the public sphere, groups needs to occupy public spaces (Mitchell, 2003). Thus, inclusiveness is also related to a conflict about the right to the city, which is certainly not an a priori given for the working-class in the popular economy sector.

Beyond the ideal notions of how a public space should be, evidently different public spaces in different socio-historical and geographical contexts would have distinct characteristics. That is a question to be posed for the research rather than ideals be taken as an assumption. Publicness is not to be understood as bounded to a coherent unified group devoid of differences (Carmona, 2010). Meanings about the public and how actors produce public spaces experience variegation in relation to time and place: “different groups give different meanings to space” (Madanipour, 1999). To understand how actors give meaning to and produce these spaces is the aim of this research, and that requires to embrace an open approach that could capture the presence of forms of seeing and experiencing these spaces.

Generally, studies on local public spaces refer to places such as streets, paths, parks, squares, means of transport such as public trains and buses, and others. My research deals with a different kind of public space, which are workplaces of the popular economy sector. Thus, to address this matter comprehensively, I integrate the review of the literature on social economy and popular economy in the following section.

2.3 Studies on social and popular economy

Beyond the epicentres of global capitalism, there is an emergent social phenomenon and a new political subject, composed of an alternative working class that has been excluded from the conventional labour market. Neoliberalisation processes have produced new forms of labour, leading to the fragmentation of working classes, deepening inequalities, precarisation, and the realisation that traditional forms of access to the full social citizenship rights via employment may have become a relic of the past (Chhachhi, 2014). Against this backdrop, this new working class is innovating with the creation of alternative forms of labour. In contexts of socio-economic adversity, participants in my

research have revived unused public spaces to create workplaces where they can earn a livelihood and at the same time commit to socio-environmental causes.

Existing research on the changes that forms of labour have undergone in recent decades have proposed and theorised the notions of social economy first, and then popular economy. They identify a growing number of initiatives that do not easily fit into traditional ways of conceptualising labour in employment schemes. In this section, I review both of these notions of social and popular economy considering how they contribute to the analysis of the empirical evidence collected in my research. With the help of these theories, I can progress in my conceptualisation of a popular form of publicness that is produced in these workplaces. The concept of popular here is aligned with the idea of *pueblo*, a political category to identify the oppressed and the subordinated of the system (Coraggio & Loritz, 2022), as opposed to the ruling elites.

2.3.1 A third sector beyond the state?

Social economy, sometimes also social and solidarity economy, is a concept brought into discussion to explain alternative forms of organisation for needs provision after the crisis of Fordism and the welfare state model. It can be described as a way to address the shortcomings of state provision but also free from the profit-seeking orientation of the private sector (Bridge et al., 2014). This is a broad concept that has inspired the formulation of more recent notions such as popular economy, which is the one that I choose in this thesis. Thus, in order to understand this phenomenon, it is important to review these prior theoretical efforts to understand these newer economies beyond the more traditional labour market forms.

Centrally, the literature on social economy provides ideas to define more precisely what is alternative about these kinds of initiatives. Emerging in economically challenging contexts, these experiences seek to meet social needs and overcome social exclusion through not-for-profit activities, or that do not seek profit-maximisation (Amin, 2009; Amin et al., 2002; Quarter et al., 2009). These initiatives are becoming more significant during the current global austerity context, where social movements, cooperatives, and associations are experimenting with alternative socio-economic forms of organisation

(Arampatzi, 2020). Social economy practices are said to be oriented by principles such as solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, social utility, democracy, emancipation, working for the common good, social service provision, and environmental care (Amin, 2009; Arampatzi, 2020; Graham & Cornwell, 2009; Pearce, 2009; Wanderley, 2019). This literature helps in challenging the usual assumptions about economic organisations, which expand beyond market-driven practices (Graham & Cornwell, 2009). Examples of social economy initiatives include a diverse ecosystem of co-operatives, community businesses, credit unions, fair trade and mutual-aid networks, social enterprises, etc.

The literature also highlights that these alternative economies cannot be understood as a charity sphere, a safety net, or a residual or marginal activity (Amin, 2009; Amin et al., 2002). On the contrary, they are recognised in both their economic and political dimensions, motivated by the creation of jobs, the empowerment of their participants, the creation of forms of participatory democracy at the local scale (Amin et al., 2002), the opposition and resistance against the model of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession (Arampatzi, 2020; Ferguson, 2018), and the struggle for an alternative development model and project for societies (Lemaître et al., 2011). This is relevant for the aims of this thesis, since the experiences I study express forms of political participation, which as I show, are motivated by fostering production, progressing social inclusion, and providing answers to the socio-environmental crisis. They represent alternatives to the dominance of extractivism and dispossession in the Latin American territories.

Social economy is distinguished conceptually both from the market and also from the state as a distinct third sector (Bridge et al., 2014; Pearce, 2009; Quarter et al., 2009). The market economy is understood as governed by private interests, and oriented towards making profits, not well-suited to provide community services, mutual aid, or address environmental issues (Bridge et al., 2014; Pearce, 2009). The literature also points out issues with the state-led economy, either due to its centralistic orientation or budget inefficiencies (Bridge et al., 2014). Thus, the need for a of this third sector with alternative values. In line with this distinction, this literature assimilates the concept of public economy to that of the state economy, like many of the works on municipalism reviewed in

2.2.1 do, distinguishing the social economy from both the public and the market one (Amin, 2009; Arampatzi, 2020; Bridge et al., 2014; Caeiro, 2008; Nyssens, 1997). This stark distinction is not the approach I follow in this thesis, as publicness does not merely entail the state, but can involve a plural arrangement.

Despite this contrast indicated in the literature, it has been identified that for the success of social economy initiatives, the support of local authorities and public policies is relevant. Although it is argued that state support is not necessary for its existence, it is recognised that these economies are heavily reliant on the support of public funds, and do not necessarily exist against the state (Amin et al., 2002; Arampatzi, 2020). The social economy by itself cannot counteract the effects of decades of disinvestment and austerity policies (Amin et al., 2002). Moreover, it has been discussed how the social economy sometimes emerges from dialogues between governments and movements, as well as from state policies in a top-down way (Lemaître et al., 2011). Due to the way in which this literature defines social economy as a different sector in principle, this reliance is sometimes negatively categorised as "obstacles for the development of autonomous social economy organisations" (Lemaître et al., 2011, p. 165). In this dissertation I argue that these perspectives need to be relativised, as a strong focus on denouncing the relation with the state as a form of dependency can diminish the recognition of the agency of participants of the initiatives and their struggles to increase the support from policies. This can end up relegating them to an unproductive isolation from the resources they require to make their projects a reality.

Literature on social economy is not specific to Latin America. Multiple social economy experiences have been identified in variegated geographical contexts, from Glasgow and other cities in the United Kingdom (Amin et al., 2002), Canada (Quarter et al., 2009), to various South American countries such as Bolivia (Ferguson, 2018), Venezuela, Brazil (Lemaître et al., 2011), and Argentina (Coraggio & Arroyo, 2009). Ferguson (2018) indicates the importance of considering historical, geographical, cultural, and socio-economical variations of these experiences. For instance, this author mentions that the focus on the non-profit dimension of social economy, which is stressed in North America and the

United Kingdom, is not present in Bolivia. This emphasis on the non-profit aspect is also not present in the cases that I study in Argentina. I cover this discussion in more detail in Chapter 5, arguing that participants do not merely aim to survive.

Ferguson (2018) recognises that most of the literature's understandings of this notion are based on European and North American experiences. In contrast, the term popular economy is distinctive to the Latin American context (França Filho, 2002), hence my preference for the latter to analyse my case studies. In the next sub-section, I refer to the evolution of this concept towards the recognition of the agency and political dimension of participants of this alternative economy.

2.3.2 The agency of popular economy workers

The notion of popular economy (*economía popular*) has been increasingly used after the 2000s[10] to conceptualise a sector of the economy that emerged as a consequence of the exclusion of a substantial number of workers from the labour market. In Argentina, the growth in unemployment figures during the 1990s (Curcio et al., 2011) led to the expansion of a vast "archipelago of experiences" (Mazzeo & Stratta, 2021, p. 21) aiming to provide participants of means of living through alternative economic activities. It is formed of workers that work without a direct employer, a characteristic of the popular economy which is described by the motto '*sin patrón*' (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014). These have distinct forms of organisation, with workers managing the means of production and prioritising life reproduction and not capital (Mazzeo & Stratta, 2021). More details about the socio-historical context of expansion of popular economy in Argentina can be found in Chapter 3.

There are a growing number of studies on popular economy in the Argentine context, indicating the importance and distinctiveness of this phenomenon. Two different strands of analysis can be identified in that respect. On the one hand, there are sociological and economical studies that examine this topic at the structural and macro-level. They characterise the popular economy and the

[10] There is literature prior to that date that discusses the notion of popular economy, such as Coraggio (1994) and Nyssens (1997). However, more recently, studies on this subject have proliferated in line with the expansion of the social mobilisation of these groups.

traditional capitalist economy as different sectors that coexist in the Argentinian economy. Authors agree that both sectors are related to each other, and indicate that the relation between each of them is not egalitarian, but of subordination from the latter (Chena, 2018; Mazzeo & Stratta, 2021). From this starting point, and in favour of the counter-hegemonic potentiality of the popular economy sector, Mazzeo and Stratta (2021) question the predominance of the capitalist mode of production. The popular economy is characterised, in comparison to the dominant sector of the economy, as a sector with low levels of productivity, income and accumulation rates, undervalorised merchandises, intensive use of low-skilled workforce, marginalisation, regressive cost structures, financial restrictions, and reliance on old and obsolete technologies. Despite being against participants' wishes, popular economy can be functional to the capitalist economy according to these authors, as the capitalist sector indirectly exploits the popular economy sector by appropriating their surpluses (Chena, 2018; Mazzeo & Stratta, 2021). In addition, the labour of the popular economy workers is undervalued, and they pay higher costs for the goods they consume in relation to the dominant sectors (Roig, 2017). According to Gago (2014), popular economy can become a form of "neoliberalism from below", when subjects turn into entrepreneurs of the self, expected to be autonomous and free, and individually responsible of conditions that they cannot guarantee.

These studies are crucial to acknowledge how structural asymmetries of power in the capitalist economy affect the popular economy sector. This prevents analyses from falling into idealistic expectations of how the sector should be, and situate these experiences in a broader context of inequality. However, it is necessary to be careful when talking about popular economy as a whole, as it is a highly heterogeneous sector. Moreover, focusing exclusively on the negative aspects of the popular economy sector hinders our ability to accurately showcase what these actors are contributing and producing, in addition to indicating the sector's shortcomings compared to the dominant economic sector.

On the other hand, another group of studies provide a different perspective. The stress is put on the workers' strategies and actions. From this second group of studies I highlight their description of popular economy as situated political experiences, including their processes of participation and political disputes.

They are central to my understanding of the case-studies in their political dimension, and to the development of a situated methodological approach, that I explore in the following Chapter 3. I consider that this perspective emphasises the agency of participants, by bringing to the fore the diverse ways in which they describe and give meaning to their practices.

Fernández Álvarez (2016, 2019) reflects on how the notion of popular economy is a political category that articulates different working experiences into a public claim for better living conditions. This is the result of social movements organising in Argentina to demand for better working conditions for this sector. Rach (2021) reconstructs the history of the unionisation of the popular economy workers in CTEP and then UTEP, their organisational strategies and forms of collective action. Muñoz and Villar (2017) define this process as a transformation of a "social movement towards unionism", articulating both movement and labour union logics. In turn, Sorroche and Schejter (2021) consider how this process of self-identification as workers is linked to historical images of the Argentine working class, its demands and forms of organisation, remembering the relevance of the labour union as a form of working-class organisation in this country. Bruno and Palumbo (2018) analyse the pedagogical labour involved in the educational and training spaces of the CTEP. Then, Palumbo and Buratovich (2021) examine how the process of unionisation is combined and complemented by indigenous *Mapuche* traditions in rural communities. Pacífico et al. (2022) evidence how the practice of taking pictures of the material results of their labour is a way by which they can self-recognise and be recognised as workers in a context of political dispute about the value of these alternative practices. Also, Maldovan Bonelli (2012) and Sorroche (2017) attest how waste picker organisations delineate strategies to create their own cooperatives and establish relations with NGOs and state agencies in order to promote policies for the sector. These works are also interested in exploring life trajectories, relations at the family and community level, and the knowledge that the workers bring into these initiatives (Perissinotti, 2022; Señorans, 2020), particularly considering the migrant origins of a large portion of them (Perissinotti, 2022).

By focusing on the workers' agency, this latter group of studies counterbalance the tendency of the former group of concentrating on how the popular economy

is subordinated to the capitalist system, and highlighting their role as reproductive agents of the neoliberal logics that oppress them. Thanks to this second perspective, we can recognise the diverse and active spectrum of initiatives that form part of the popular economy. Moreover, in some cases, participants of the popular economy signify their practices as possibilities for "getting out of highly exploitative labour relations", "abuse", and "humiliation" (Perissinotti, 2022, p. 316). These significations cannot be disregarded in their relevance.

However, this does not mean that participants do not experience challenges and difficulties as they decide to create their workplaces, considering the context of crisis and inequality where these are situated. It would not be adequate to blur the broader environments where groups of workers have to operate, as this would hide the social and economic asymmetries that the popular economy face in comparison to the conventional capitalist sector (Mazzeo & Stratta, 2021). Popular economy and agroecological initiatives involve political processes of dispute with powerful actors that support the agribusiness and extractivist economic model. They enter into this dispute with much less resources, and they seek to construct workplaces with only few elements in a context of austerity. Accessing participants' testimonies on how they perceive these difficulties via a situated methodology is another way to reflect on those. Participants are far from blind to their material conditions of existence, and the many challenges they face on their daily lives.

Highlighting the agency of popular economy workers is also a good complement for the perspective brought about by the social economy literature. This literature, as reviewed, makes a critical contribution by seeing these alternative economies not as a residual or marginal activities for subsistence, but as a myriad of experiences with a politico-economic dimension. As Chena (2017) mentions, popular economy extend beyond merely seeking biological reproduction, teetering on the brink of survival. For that reason, in order to be faithful to this perspective, I avoid describing popular economy initiatives as "experiences of precarity" (Fernández Álvarez, 2019), as that word appears somewhat inconsistent with the aim of showing popular economy's political dimension.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the research of Fernández Álvarez (2016) on popular economy workers resignifying the publicness of public spaces. This author focuses on analysing groups of vendors on public transports, football stadiums, public events, artisans and craftsperson in fairs, etc. For these workers, streets are not mere spaces for the circulation of passers-by, but places to work and commerce, to reproduce life, and for entering into political disputes about the right to sell in public spaces. Expanding into the idea of understanding publicness in relation to work, I analyse in my thesis how participants signify the public spaces as productive places. While Fernández Álvarez's (2016) research concentrates in the practices of selling in public spaces, I show how public spaces can also be sites of economic production. I study a different kind of participants and spaces, not the streets, but green spaces owned by the state. These spaces are repurposed by agroecological workers to become spaces for growing food and for regenerating the environment. Their practices also reveal how a public space can be different to its hegemonic understanding, associated with a "middle-class perception of its idle use" (Bodnar, 2015, p. 2098).

So far, I have addressed literature that has been helpful to orientate my research towards local public spaces and popular economy practices. A third group of studies helps to understand my case studies more specifically, by acknowledging the research produced on agroecology, particularly in Latin America, and the relevance of urban growing initiatives such as community gardens in derelict places.

2.4 Socio-environmental activism for agroecology and the transformation of urban spaces

This section explores two broad bodies of literature that have informed my research and guided my understanding of the phenomenon of agricultural initiatives with a socio-environmental approach. Firstly, studies on agroecological practices helped me understand this phenomenon not merely as a scientific approach to growing crops, but as a political movement with decades of expansion in Latin America thanks to the drive of a plurality of actors, particularly, several grassroots movements, with the UTT and MTE being part of it in Argentina. Subsection 2.4.1 focuses on this. Secondly, Subsection 2.4.2 examines the main impacts that the literature on urban gardens and food

growing, particularly community gardening, has had on my perspective. These works help bringing focus onto the spatial dimension of these practices, locating initiatives as part of a broader phenomenon of reclaiming and rebuilding derelict and vacant lots in the cities.

2.4.1 Agroecological movements from the global to the local scales

The concept of agroecology in the literature has been addressed in two different ways. It can be conceived as a "scientific discipline" in itself, but, importantly for the aim of this thesis, as a "movement" (Wezel et al., 2009). Agroecological movements politicise agricultural methods, showing that all technologies and techniques bring "ideological baggage" (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). Agricultural methods are not neutral: modes of production entail consequences for societies and the environment. I focus on this conceptualisation of agroecology as a movement, as an activist practice, and a mobilised public cause in the universe of socio-environmental activism.

Agroecology is a movement that emerges as a response to the agribusiness model, the export-oriented monoculture agricultural sector that brings about negative impacts on public health, the ecosystem, food quality, and the economy of small farmers. It promotes an alternative paradigm for agricultural development based on democratic participation and revitalisation of small farms through methods that care for the environment (Altieri, 2009; Altieri & Nicholls, 2008). By engaging with agroecological practices, social movements actively defend spaces and recover degraded lands against agribusiness' extractivist strategies. They also contest processes of land-grabbing by corporations, by supporting land occupations in benefit of landless farmers, and promoting agrarian reform (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). The contemporary social movements UTT and MTE in Argentina that I refer to in my research can be included in this definition.

The term 'agroecology' can be traced back to the 1930s in Europe, associated with its scientific use (Wezel et al., 2009), but grew in Latin America since the 1980s with the drive from grassroots activism in several countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Perú, Ecuador, and centrally, Cuba

(Altieri & Toledo, 2011; Rivera-Núñez et al., 2020). Latin America became the epicentre of a worldwide "agroecological revolution" (Altieri & Toledo, 2011), "the most politically charged and popularly organised" against neoliberalisation due to their connection to social movements (Rosset et al., 2022, p. 635).

To date, specialised literature in the phenomenon of agroecology helps us to understand it as a global movement with a variety of relevant actors and a global advocacy agenda. It identifies relevant actors at the global scale as drivers of the agroecological movement, their diversity, and the forms of knowledge and educational practices they develop. Giraldo and Rosset (2018) map the most important actors in the international arena and their disputes for the meanings of agroecology, between visions closer to that of the agribusiness or to the social movements. Most studies recognise the relevance of *Vía Campesina* (the Peasant Way), a global peasant movement. This organisation became an object of study in itself. Research has shown different aspects of this organisation, including its pedagogical practices through peasant agroecology schools and other "educational territories" for the formation of actors with technical capacities and also political cadres of the movement (Rosset et al., 2019), its history and changes in leadership and strategies through the years (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010), and the tensions between its international expansion and local interests (Desmarais, 2008). Studies have also illuminated how organisations' strategies and practices help to give rise to the "agroecological peasantry" as a new global political subject, as activists for the transformation of the current structures (Rosset et al., 2019) and a "peasant internationalism" (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010).

Research has also discussed the challenges for agroecological activism to overcome localist tendencies via "scaling" strategies in order to become a wider alternative to the dominant regime. "Up-scaling" involves expanding the movement by using public policies and state tools and institutions; and "out-scaling" is about creating diverse horizontal networks for the spread of agroecology throughout local communities (Altieri & Nicholls, 2008; Giraldo & McCune, 2019; López-García & González de Molina, 2021; McCune et al., 2017; Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012; Val et al., 2019). As an example of these strategies, authors describe the "farmer to

farmer" or "peasant to peasant" (*campesino a campesino*) method by which agroecological practitioners share their experiences among peers throughout different farms (Bernal et al., 2023; Rosset et al., 2011; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012; Val et al., 2019). In turn, Jansen argues that for agroecology to grow beyond local "niche activities" (2015, p. 228) and become an alternative to current agricultural regimes, it needs to join larger commodity networks and complex industrialisation chains, as well as count with the support of state institutions and scientific and technical support. At the same time, as agroecology expands, studies have warned against the dangers of "greenwashing" practices, by which some governments, NGOs, corporations, and international agencies use the term agroecology but remove its emancipatory and transformative content (Giraldo & Rosset, 2022; Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2013). Efforts to institutionalise agroecology from governments, transnational institutions, and NGOs have been questioned for creating "false agroecologies" that erase their collective, horizontal, cultural and spiritual principles (Giraldo & Rosset, 2021).

This literature provides a comprehensive analysis of the global or supra-local dimension of agroecology, which is vital to understand the scope of this movement and its activist elements. In my research, I propose another possibility to explore agroecological experiences, studying these practices as forms of space production from a situated and local approach. This means that I centre my attention on the networks of proximity to create a form of public spatiality, and show how at the local level we can also find a plurality of actors engaging in the construction of public agroecological spaces. However, as I show, the identity of "peasant" (Desmarais, 2008; Rosset et al., 2019) is not exactly the form of subjectification of participants in my research, but rather they consider themselves in the role of workers and producers.

Departing from this tradition of studies, I seek to contribute to the understanding of agroecological activism as political participation in the production of public spaces. In this particular regard, there are some studies that have referred to the spatiality of agroecological practices. Rivera-Núñez, Fargher and Nigh (2020) use the term "landscape construction" and analyse the "landscapes of knowledge" built by peasant communities in Mexico. They

interpret these as “ethnolandscapes”, underlining the ethnic component of knowledge creation and transmission according to their case studies in Mayan communities. Agroecological spaces have also been analysed as potential forms of resistance to neoliberalism and agribusinesses (Altieri & Toledo, 2011; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). Tornaghi and Dehaene (2020) address agroecological practices as interruptions of existing capitalist urbanist logics, disrupting “speculative land markets”, “extractive and careless consumption practices” of natural resources, and imagining “a well-equipped urban landscape” for food growing (2020, pp. 605–607). Furthermore, Timmermann and Félix (2015) theorise that agroecology can promote the development of “meaningful” work environments, where actors can improve their skills and knowledge, recognise themselves as peers, and contribute to care for the community. This provides the necessary foundation for my research, as I deal with spatialities that are constructed as agroecological workplaces among peers, in opposition to the agribusiness model.

In Argentina, research on agroecological initiatives has concentrated mostly on the city of Rosario in Santa Fe. That is because there is a renowned urban agriculture public programme, with a history that dates back to the late 1980s, which recovers vacant lands for developing agroecological spaces (Hammelman et al., 2022; Lattuca, 2012; Lattuca et al., 2014; Lilli, 2018; Tornaghi & Dehaene, 2020). More broadly, Sarandón and Marasas (2015) reconstruct the evolution of the agroecological paradigm in the country since the 1980s by taking into consideration the role of NGOs, the state, educational institutions, and peasant organisations for its growth. These studies have demonstrated that the agroecological movement is not a negligible phenomenon in Argentina. Moreover, the mentioned studies on the Rosario case have clearly shown that the existence of vacant urban and peri-urban land owned by the state can be a catalyst for the development of agroecological practices, with the support of the municipal government.

My research aims to explore newer case studies created after 2015 in the country, considering the specificity of this socio-historical context of emergence and its relation to the growth of the popular economy movement. Considering this, Pinto (2020) explains that after 2015, there was an increased development

of networks of different social organisations against agribusiness and extractivism in Argentina, which include peasant associations, smallholder producers, cooperatives, technicians, academics, and others. Part of the following Chapter 3 presents this new context in view of its relationship with the popular economy sector. My research also shows how these agroecological spaces can develop both with support from local government policies, as the case in the Entre Ríos province, or without an active endorsement from municipal institutions, in the case located in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.

2.4.2 Urban gardens: recovering spaces and constructing subjectivities

A well-established body of literature that I would like to refer to in this section research urban gardens and urban agriculture initiatives, particularly, the phenomenon of community gardening. I find this literature compelling to my research, due to the three main aims addressed by several studies that align closely with my research objectives.

First, this literature is concerned with the motivations or reasons that actors have for participating in these initiatives (Adams & Hardman, 2014; Audate et al., 2021; Cattivelli, 2022; Cepic et al., 2020; Lee & Matarrita-Cascante, 2019; Martinho da Silva et al., 2016; Tandarić et al., 2022; Veen et al., 2016). I consider that exploring their motives provides a solid foundation to understand the significance of these projects, and, in my thesis, the kind of publicness that can be collectively constructed.

Second, the literature is also concerned with the analysis of these initiatives as forms of space production (Baker, 2004; Barron, 2017; Egerer & Fairbairn, 2018; Eizenberg, 2012a, 2012b; Ernwein, 2014; Milbourne, 2021), including struggles against broader neoliberalisation processes (Aptekar, 2015). In this regard, they are a good complement to the broader literature on local public spaces, which has also helped me to highlight the spatial dimension, understanding the space as constructed by social actors rather than a static background to their practices.

Third, the literature also provides a foundation upon which I can understand the construction of participants' subjectivities (Barron, 2017; Cody, 2019; Crossan et al., 2016; Pudup, 2008). Participating in these initiatives influences participants' self-perception, thus it is important to pay attention to the categories that they use to define their role and practices, and which kind of participation this delineates.

Several studies have brought to attention the fact that these initiatives emerge in derelict, neglected, and vacant urban spaces, which is something that also pertains to my case studies. This is a phenomenon which particularly affects post-industrial cities such as Glasgow (Crossan et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2016) or Detroit (Draus et al., 2014, 2019), that were once thriving manufacturing hubs. The later decline of these activities left abandoned, deteriorated, and vacant areas which can be repurposed. My research shows that this can particularly happen in places owned by the state, but subjected to deterioration or misuse as a result of its retrenchment. It also helps to move beyond the focus of the literature in Northern contexts, showing cases in the South that problematise these disinvestment tendencies.

The existence of vacant spaces opens up the possibility for collective action: participants can locate these sites and bring them back to life with urban growing initiatives. Studies have identified forms of collective action that occupy these abandoned urban spaces for radical political projects. For instance, the "guerrilla gardeners" that plant vegetation in neglected urban places as a form of political experimentation (Adams & Hardman, 2014; Certomà, 2011), or the "radical horticulture" networks that contest agrifood capitalism and private speculation (Mudu & Marini, 2018). More generally, Baker (2004) rightly argues that gardening spaces are sites of place-based politics, because by participating they are defying established urban planning notions, involving themselves with social movements, and developing alternative food networks. Smith and Kurtz (2003) also show gardeners and activists can organise and confront the neoliberal privatisation of these spaces.

Many studies highlight the function of urban gardens as spaces of socialisation, community belonging, and generation of social capital (Armstrong, 2000; Audate et al., 2021; Djokić et al., 2018; Glover, 2004; Kingsley & Townsend, 2006;

Kurtz, 2001; Milbourne, 2021; Rosol, 2012; Tandarić et al., 2022). The characteristics of this socialisation and its potential problems are also a topic of debate within the literature. Some authors debate whether urban gardens are truly sites of social inclusion. Egerer and Fairbarn (2018) draw attention to the fact that gardens cannot be merely thought of as “oases”, and that capitalist inequalities and racial tensions also infiltrate these spaces. Other authors also debate the forms in which the notion of community is constructed there, and agree that this category varies in meaning in different cases and socio-geographical contexts, highlighting the issues of inclusion and exclusion in practice (Firth et al., 2011; Kurtz, 2001; Traill, 2021). Bach and McClintock (2021) and Glover (2004) observe that, while urban agriculture collectives generally promote inclusion and open participation, there are racialised absences and exclusions that prevent them from being fully democratic. Cabannes and Raposo (2013), in turn, indicate the difficulties that migrants face for social inclusion, as participating in these spaces often means to be assimilated into values that are not of their own culture, or on the contrary, isolating themselves from the wider society.

In examining the motivations of urban garden participants, numerous studies have indicated that actors associate their involvement to health and well-being benefits, both physical and mental, as they can access healthier food, and be in a green space that has therapeutic effects (Armstrong, 2000; Audate et al., 2021; Bishop & Purcell, 2013; Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010). In addition, these sites are often described as places for escaping the pressures of work and disconnecting from daily routines (Audate et al., 2021; Hale et al., 2011; Traill, 2023), to have fun (Rosol, 2012), and for recreation, relaxation, and pleasure (Cepic et al., 2020). There, horticulture is practiced as an enjoying and relaxing “hobby” (Bishop & Purcell, 2013) in a beautiful, aesthetically pleasant environment (Aptekar, 2015; Hale et al., 2011), seen as a “sanctuary from hectic city life” (Filkobski et al., 2016, p. 154). In connection to this point, participants of urban gardens, as reported by the literature, tend to be young middle class adults with a strong environmental awareness (Audate et al., 2021), as well as retired people that find themselves having more free time to dedicate to this activity (Cepic et al., 2020; Domene & Saurí, 2007; Hanmer, 2021; Tandarić et

al., 2022), or participants with disabilities, substance use disorders, or other health concerns (Cumbers et al., 2018; Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010).

The literature has reflected on the voluntary aspect of participation that can be found in their reported cases. First, this indicates a problematic aspect of these initiatives, as volunteerism can be used by the state as a form of extracting resources and labour from citizens, and delegating its responsibility for social service provision (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; Rosol, 2012), assigning individuals the responsibility for adapting to neoliberal economic restructuring (Pudup, 2008). Second, volunteers are required to have free time and resources to dedicate to gardening spaces without receiving a monetary compensation, which effectively excludes many from participating (St Clair et al., 2020). This leads to questioning if the participation of non-affluent people is possible on these spaces.

In relation to this, when referring to low-income participants, the literature considers that their main motivation is food security (Martinho da Silva et al., 2016) or the economic rewards they can get from producing food (Audate et al., 2021). These participants are described as uninterested in environmental or educational motives, in contrast to middle-class attendees. These findings offer a valuable perspective, recognising that generating an income is also a possible reason for participation. This points out that there can be alternative gardening experiences which are not monopolised by middle class participants, and that these spaces do not need to be dominated by the ethos of volunteerism. However, I believe that there is no need to draw an absolute contrast between these two motives, the economic and the environmental, while observing the participation of the working class. The two motives can be seen as interconnected, and are not mutually exclusive. Working class participants can also be interested in the environmental and educational aspects of the projects.

In this respect, one of the big absences in the literature pertains to projects whose main participants define themselves as workers and producers and do not come from affluent sectors. Descriptions of workers managing urban agriculture and gardening experiences appear as a remnant of a past socialist era (Bellows, 2004), or symbol of the effort of the national effort during the two world wars in the case of the allotments (McKay, 2011). Some authors wish for the

reemergence of a “class-based political response” that is “nowhere yet seen” (Draus et al., 2014, p. 2537). The fact that these are spaces where a new sense of identity based on productive work can be fostered (Cumbers et al., 2018) is scarcely referenced. I intend to address this gap in the literature, by showing the centrality that these categories have for the form of publicness that is built in the agroecological initiatives that I describe.

2.5 Conclusions

The intersection between the bodies of literature covered throughout this chapter helps me establish a foundation for understanding publicness, as well as to narrow down and define the focus of my research towards the study of agroecological and popular economy public spaces. From this review, it can be seen that there are several challenges and opportunities for expanding social knowledge on the production of publicness in contemporary societies.

First, the analysis of the literature provides elements to understand publicness as plural and participatory. There is no need to define this notion as a synonym of centralised state ownership and top-down planning: it can be expanded towards a pluralistic idea, revalorising the participatory and decision-making role of broader societal actors (Cumbers & McMaster, 2012). This concurs with Kip and van Dyk’s (2024) idea of publicness as the social engagement around collectively-valuable resources. Conversely, I believe that replacing the notion of publicness with commons brings less clarity. This is because, although publicness is not defined as only equivalent to state ownership and control, the state continues to have a degree of relevance in both of my case studies. Seeing publicness as participatory and plural allows us to grasp how it is co-constituted by the relationships established between the state and other actors, including social movements. The state can then be observed as a “fruitful terrain of struggle” (Angel, 2017, p. 566) for movements such as the ones that I study. It can even become a catalyst, at the municipal level, for the creation of agroecological spaces, as the case study in Entre Ríos shows, as well as the literature that studied the urban agriculture public spaces in Rosario (Hammelman et al., 2022; Lattuca, 2012).

It is also necessary then, in order to recognise the capacity of agency of social actors, to avoid perceiving the relationships traced between social movements of the popular economy and the state as sheer forms of cooptation or dependency, as the specialised literature on the Argentinian case has already shown (Longa, 2019a; Natalucci, 2012). For the movements of the popular economy, engaging with state institutions implies the possibility of transforming their ideas and projects into public policies, that without state support, would be very limited and even not feasible (Longa, 2019b). This perspective allows me to consider the dynamic and inter-mingled relationship between state and social movements, without thinking of them as homogeneous and essentialised entities. Popular economy and agroecological initiatives can have various forms and degrees of support from state institutions, at different levels, from municipal and national public policies, as my case studies show. At the same time, for the initiatives to develop, state action is not enough: they depend on the involvement of other movements and forms of participation.

In addition, the literature reviewed here provides several elements to conceptualise local public spaces as political arenas, hence, underline the political dimension of the construction of publicness that I study. First, because the municipal scale should not be seen as inherently less significant than processes at the national level. Movements at the municipal scale can defend their capacities for autonomy and self-government (Cumbers & Paul, 2020; Thompson, 2020). Second, public spaces can become arenas for political participation, social inclusion (Amin, 2008), and struggles to ascertain the right to the city (Mitchell, 2003) of the excluded. Third, that the economic experiences studied here are not marginal activities, but political struggles for alternative forms of society and economic development (Amin et al., 2002) organised into social movements with a labour union orientation. Fourth, these public spaces can, on the one hand, become sites of dispute against the expansion of agribusiness models and struggles for land access for landless workers (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012), and, on the other, places to counteract the neoliberal dynamics of privatisation (C. M. Smith & Kurtz, 2003), disinvestment and neglect (Crossan et al., 2016). Overall, local public spaces can become political loci for the creation of alternative economic forms. In the

initiatives that I research, these local public spaces have a productive function, and are constituted as workplaces of the popular economy.

Finally, the current literature provides substantial insights into the subjectivity of the actors involved in these processes of public construction. For instance, citizen is a common term that can be thought of in relation to publicness, defined as appealing to the general interest and the contrary of the realm of particularistic interests (Bookchin, 2005). But it also appears as an abstract term, not broadly used by the participants involved in this research to identify themselves. Worker and producer are more appropriate terms, that designate the central feature of these public spaces as workplaces, and are used by many of the participants as categories of self-identification. With this in mind, the popular economy literature (Coraggio & Loritz, 2022), as well as the interviews maintained with research participants, help characterise this subjectivity. These are self-organised and worker-managed economic initiatives, without a direct employer or boss. Moreover, contrary to several urban agriculture and community gardening experiences, these initiatives are not dominated by its reliance on volunteering (St Clair et al., 2020), because one of the main aims of participants is earning a living through their participation.

In what follows, I present the methodological approach that orientates this thesis, described as a qualitative and situated inquiry which concentrates on the analysis of popular economy agroecological workplaces. I aim to capture the specific meanings mobilised by participants to designate the experience of being part of the production of these public spaces, to understand the construction of these spaces as situated political experiences.

Chapter 3 Methodological approach for analysing the public as situated

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology I use to address my research question, dealing with the forms of publicness that emerge in spaces dedicated to agroecological production by actors of the popular economy. First, the chapter describes how this question emerged, with an interest in understanding the current efforts of subaltern sectors to reclaim and construct forms of publicness. Beyond the boundaries of European and North American geographies, there are sites of dispute against processes of neoliberalisation that reveal new ways of constructing and transforming public spatialities. In Argentina, these struggles manifest as conflicts against processes of dispossession and extractivism, expressed in the creation of forms of participation around popular labour and agroecological production. A brief recent history of the popular economy and agroecological movements in Argentina is also included in this chapter.

Then, I outline the research process used to address this inquiry. This is a qualitative research of two case studies, which aims to understand how participants construct meanings to make sense of their involvement in building popular economy agroecological workplaces. These interpretations created by participants constitute the foundation for building theory on these new forms of publicness. I describe my approach as situated, because the conceptualisations emerge from knowledge shared by participants during my on-site fieldwork, and make sense with reference to a particular socio-political conjuncture.

This chapter is structured into four parts. Section 3.2 explains how the open research question on the forms of publicness emerged. This is as a way to understand the specific and novel forms that processes of deprivatisation and disputes against neoliberalism can take. Section 3.3 immerses the reader in the Argentinian context of popular economy and agroecological movements, in order to better understand the milieu where the case studies are situated. Then, Section 3.4 describes the process of case selection, which is oriented to understand disputes over the public at the local scale that could dialogue with

the particularities of the Argentinian context. Following this, Section 3.5 deals with the semi-structured interviews and participant observations methods used to obtain the qualitative data that forms the basis of this research. Before concluding, in Section 3.6, I describe how I analysed the data. I followed a coding process influenced by the insights of constructivist grounded theory to build concepts.

3.2 Opening up the research question

My research started with an interest in the phenomenon of remunicipalisation, as part of my participation as a PhD student in a broader European Research Council project, "Global Remunicipalisation and the Post-Neoliberal Turn", where my supervisors and a broader team are also involved. Remunicipalisation is a phenomenon by which formerly privatised assets and services return to public ownership at the local scale. There is a trend of remunicipalisations located by the literature in other geographies (Angel, 2017; Cumbers, 2013; Cumbers & Becker, 2018; Geagea et al., 2023; Kishimoto et al., 2020; McDonald & Swyngedouw, 2019). Our collective research project set the challenge to contribute to the development of its conceptualisation, attentive to its "actually existing forms" and variations across different spatial contexts (Cumbers & Paul, 2020). Argentina was one of the countries selected in the collective research project for in-depth study, along with the United States and Germany.

The literature has identified Argentina as a site of struggles against a localised neoliberal crisis during the 2000s, with examples of state-led deprivatisations of water services, pension and welfare funds, the postal service, the national airline, railway services, and the national oil company (Chaia De Bellis, 2023; Colbert, 2017; Cumbers & Paul, 2022; Rocca, 2014), as well as popular movements and grassroots organisations that dispute, defend and aim to strengthen public goods and spaces against processes of neoliberalisation and social and environmental extractivism (Ouviña & Renna, 2022). Argentina is a promising geographical area to explore renovated forms of public ownership, considering it is a country characterised by an expanded level of dissent and protests against the consequences of neoliberal policies. However, when fine-tuning our vision, it soon emerges that processes of deprivatisation and reclaiming publicness have taken on their own specific shape. This confirms that

the inquiry on the construction of public initiatives is significant to the Argentinian context, and reinforces the importance of dialoguing with different geographies to understand the ongoing struggles and efforts to reclaim the public.

Initial research questions are “seldom set in stone” in the course of social research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p. 10), and my research is no exception. Terms and concepts vary significantly in their interpretation from one country or region to another (Przeworski & Teune, 1966). In this case, a literal translation of the word remunicipalisation, translated into Spanish as *remunicipalización*, was neither extended on Argentinian specialised literature, nor used as a ‘folk concept’ when social actors define their practices. I started to question, thus, to what extent the concept of remunicipalisation could travel, in order to avoid the “conceptual stretching”, that happens when a category developed for one set of cases is applied to other cases, and then the differences in the new cases make the original category no longer appropriate (Collier & Mahon, 1993; Sartori, 1970). The concept of remunicipalisation is better equipped to deal with cases that involve direct processes of deprivatisation by municipalities, that is, when formerly privatised services return to public ownership. It is easier to identify such cases in the field of public services (Cumbers, 2013), when there is a legal “contract reversal” (Clifton et al., 2019) and when there are specific companies involved. Though the concept of remunicipalisation can accurately describe one of the forms of publicness nowadays, it would not be appropriate to add cases that only marginally fit this idea (Collier & Mahon, 1993, p. 846) to my research.

So, in order to progress with the research, I formulated my research question in a more open way, inviting comprehensive exploration to other possible forms of the public. This allows the discovery of the diverse features that the phenomenon of the construction of publicness at the local level may have, bearing in mind that this phenomenon may vary in different geographies. Therefore, I favoured a flexible and interpretive methodological approach that would allow me to capture the specificities of this phenomenon in Argentinian municipalities.

I seek to understand publicness from a situated perspective. With that in mind, publicness becomes a concept created from below, from concrete practices and

from the forms of signification that participants create as they experience and give form to it. In the situated perspective I propose, it matters how actors themselves experience and create the spaces to bring life to their agroecological projects. This helps to recognise and valorise the "agency of Southern actors" (Connell & Dados, 2014, p. 134) and Southern geographies as also "sites in the production of global processes" (Hart, 2020, p. 241). Social research, then, becomes more open to the diverse, complex, and plural forms of the public, attentive to how participants create it.

My immersion in the research led me to discover a new world of categories that participants use to make sense of their practices. I did not possess extensive knowledge of notions such as popular economy and agroecology. Although my prior research on participatory budgeting (Arpini, 2020) was also related to participation at the local scale, it included different kinds of actors and discussions. The involvement of social movements was not present there, and the topics of debate between actors appeared as depoliticised, and dominated by bureaucratic and technical governmental procedures.

I also incorporated and fed into the analysis literature on popular economy and agroecology to understand the phenomenon, while my fieldwork kept progressing and the theoretical direction of my thesis became better defined. My research unfolded throughout the concurrent processes of collecting data, interpretation, and expansion of the original corpus of literature. In the following section, I expand upon the recent history of the phenomenon of popular economy and agroecological movements in Argentina. This helps situate the question of publicness in this particular research context, as tied to the issues of labour and the environment.

3.3 Research context: popular economy and agroecology in contemporary Argentina

Long-running neoliberalisation processes that have been unfolding in the country at least since the 1970s, with a new finance-dominated accumulation regime, triggered the advent of what is now a massive phenomenon: the exclusion of a large portion of the working population from the labour market and the related basic social protection guarantees associated with Fordism and the welfare state

model (Basualdo, 2006; Danani & Hintze, 2011; Kessler & Di Virgilio, 2008; Merklen, 2010).

Dissent against the consequences of this new political and economic model were chiefly expressed in several cycles of social mobilisation in Argentina, particularly with rising Movements of Unemployed Workers (*Movimientos de Trabajadores Desocupados*, MTDs) which emerged during the 1990s (Svampa & Pereyra, 2009) in a context of increase of unemployment figures (Curcio et al., 2011). Created during the outbreak of this crisis, grassroots participatory networks for the provision of vital resources and services and management of newly-created social assistance programmes became crucial in Argentinian everyday politics (Quirós, 2011; Svampa & Pereyra, 2009), leading to the development of a lasting, extensive, and diverse network of neighbourhood-based and popular activist groups. Particularly, the experience of workers recovering companies from bankruptcy and turning them into self-managed workers' co-operatives opened up the possibility of collectively thinking another kind of economy beyond the usual employer-employee form (Coraggio & Arroyo, 2009; Rebón, 2005; Vieta, 2010). This process lays the foundation for the subsequent growth of the organised popular economy, and its conjunction with the agroecological paradigm, to which I refer in this section.

3.3.1 From movements of the unemployed to popular economy union movements

Amidst this crisis, various alternative economic activities expanded, to provide subsistence for people. These included activities such as waste picking, street vending, working in community gardens, the creation of community kitchens, among others. The working class became more fragmented. Within the universe of the actively working population, a distinction for describing the working class in Argentina can be made between, on the one hand, workers that are employed, that is, are in a dependent labour relation to an employer (*patrón*), and on the other hand, independent and self-managed workers, self-employed either individually or collectively, or that work with their family. This second universe of workers do not employ others but use their own skills and working tools (Curcio et al., 2011). These alternative forms of labour organisation came into being partly in response to capitalism's structural inability to generate jobs

for the entire labour force. All of the aforementioned formed the seeds for what is now known as the popular economy sector, as these initial experiences grew and developed further, organised into new labour-oriented social movements.

The unfolding of a wave of 'post-neoliberal' governments in the region during the 2000s, particularly in Argentina since 2003, sought to reorient and pacify the political dynamics. They were centred around the 'return of the state' in social protection and development, and a more active role in the economy (Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2012, 2019; Iazzetta, 2011; Panizza, 2009; Ruckert et al., 2017; Silva, 2009; Yates & Bakker, 2014). A surge in the global demand for primary commodities allowed the expansion of welfare policies. Past trends towards a reduction in the coverage of social protection policies were reversed with a new set of social policies (Danani & Hintze, 2010). The presence of the state was also extended with its active engagement with movements and civil society actors that participated in the implementation of public policies.

In this view, many of the newly-formed social movements in Argentina readjusted their strategy in favour of reclaiming state institutions and public policies as vehicles for their transformative projects, and even supported the governmental administrations (Brand & Sekler, 2009; Dinerstein, 2010; Longa, 2019b; Svampa, 2011; Wylde, 2016). These movements kept on expanding at the local scale, with forms of social and community organisation and care, and with the links to state institutions, helped the latter to become locally materialised (Longa, 2019b; Perelmiter, 2012; Vommaro, 2017).

However, despite the economic growth, the exclusion of a large number of workers from traditional forms of employment and access to social rights continued (Abal Medina, 2016). Although the general living conditions improved during these years, certain structures inherited from neoliberal reforms were not altered, and the popular economy sector did not disappear, but became a lasting phenomenon. Thus, while social policies in the 1990s were thought of as transitory and destined to improve the capacity of its beneficiaries to become employable, in the following decade it became evident that the state needed to provide a more continuous support, considering the structural deficiencies of the formal labour market to incorporate workers to traditional forms of labour relations (Vommaro, 2017). In this vein, various programmes were launched

between 2003 and 2015 that aimed for generating and strengthening associative, cooperative, and self-managed labour initiatives (Hopp, 2018; Kasparian, 2017).

As time went by, the progressive tide of governments in the Latin American region was approaching its end after more than a decade. In Argentina, this happened in a context of intense political conflicts over redistribution and fiscal disequilibrium (Peña & Barlow, 2021). Organisations that supported the government, such as the Evita Movement, started to indicate some of the shortfalls of the Kirchnerist period, including the lack of social and labour rights that popular economy workers faced (Longa, 2019b).

In December 2015, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner ended her presidential term and was succeeded by Mauricio Macri, who was supported by a centre-right oriented coalition. This government had to grapple with many structural socio-economic tensions that were already present, such as the mentioned growth of alternative labour forms in the face of the systemic deficiency of formal employment inclusion. Moreover, the deregulation of the economy and the decline in consumer spending led to increasing labour losses (Vommaro & Gené, 2017).

During a new wave of mobilisations, popular economy movements exerted pressure on the government in order to gain institutional recognition of the sector and guarantee state support via public policies (Coraggio & Loritz, 2022; Larsen & Capparelli, 2021; Natalucci et al., 2023; Niedzwiecki & Pribble, 2017; Vommaro & Gené, 2017). For instance, obtaining the approval of a Social Emergency law, the recognition of the public funds they receive as a Complementary Social Salary, or the Urban Integration law. In view of the inter-organisational articulation of labour union movements in opposition to austerity policies, their increasing contentious activities, and despite the neoliberal rhetoric proclaimed by Macri's government, during his term in office the deployment of social programmes did not suffer from major spending cuts (Niedzwiecki & Pribble, 2017), though their designs were reformulated to curtail their associative and cooperative elements towards more individualist visions (Hopp, 2018).

Despite this adverse context, since 2016, popular economy movements strengthened their levels of autonomy, by directly implementing the social programmes at the local level without necessarily having municipal governments as intermediaries (Arcidiácono & Bermúdez, 2018; Mate, 2020). This is, as I show in this research, what occurs in the initiative located in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. In contrast, the initiative located in the province of Entre Ríos has the direct involvement of the municipal government. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 4.

In 2011, the CTEP, precursor of the current UTEP, was created. Several social organisations, namely, the MTE, the Evita Movement, and others, decided to constitute themselves as a confederation of workers, asserting their identification as a labour union[11]. The movements that are part of it aim to organise the working-class sector that "invented" their own jobs after the experience of unemployment and socio-economic crisis that the country went through in the preceding decades. But it was since 2016 when they became more widely known in the public arena, as they participated and led a significant number of mobilisations. For instance, acts in commemoration of the Workers Day in the 1st of May, and the 7th of August, which is Saint Cajetan day, patron of labour for the Catholic church (Natalucci & Mate, 2023).

In December 2019, Mauricio Macri was succeeded by Alberto Fernández, who governed until 2023 as part of a Peronist-led coalition. This government was affected by a complex socio-economic situation, with rising inflation and external debt pressures. The impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic only aggravated this scenario, as it exacerbated socio-economic inequalities all over the Latin American region (Benza & Kessler, 2021; Bottan et al., 2020; Lustig et al., 2023). In Argentina, a series of social policies were launched which aimed to contain the negative effects of the lockdown policies[12], including an Emergency Family Income (*Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia*, IFE) for informal and low-income workers. There was also financial support to self-managed cooperatives, and small agricultural and food sovereignty projects (Natalucci et al., 2022).

[11] Media sources reported that by November 2023, UTEP had 420,000 members (Vales, 2023).
[12] They were officially called Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation (*Aislamiento Social Preventivo y Obligatorio*, ASPO), and later, Preventive and Mandatory Social Distancing (*Distanciamiento Social Preventivo y Obligatorio*, DiSPO).

This made the popular economy sector more visible in Argentina: the implementation of these policies revealed the existing scale of the phenomenon (Busso et al., 2022; Fernández Álvarez et al., 2021). However, popular economy initiatives still found it difficult to generate the necessary income for their workers, or invest in means of production to improve an already fragile economic sector. At the same time, they engaged in further activities as the food and health crisis became worse, opening more community kitchens and delivering aid for those in need (Fernández Álvarez, Laurens, et al., 2022). Participants of these movements consider that it was this popular self-organisation the one that delivered more effective responses to the crisis, in view of the difficulties of the state to adapt their strategies to diverse local situations and urgencies (González et al., 2022).

Recently, the UTEP has been involved in the campaign for an Integral Human Development Plan (*Plan de Desarrollo Humano Integral*) which focuses on the creation of policies for the development of rural communities and horticultural production areas for food sovereignty, access to land for producers, provision of affordable housing, and socio-environmental care in view of the ecological and health crisis (Grabois, 2022; Liaudat et al., 2023). They also keep on participating of traditional Workers Day and Saint Cajetan mobilisations, with the banner 'Land, Housing, and Work' (*Tierra, Techo y Trabajo*) that characterises their petitions.

3.3.2 Popular economy meets agroecology in labour union movements

In recent decades, the ecological question has grown as a problematic issue in the global political debate, especially due to the warnings about climate change in our world and its consequences for life on the planet. Argentina is not an exception, and socio-environmental mobilisations have been on the rise during the last twenty years. Some have become resonant in the public debate, attracting the participation of people in numerous cities and towns across the country, and with consequences on the formulation of public policies in different levels of government. There were multiple mobilisations and assembly-based participatory groups. Broadly, a first wave of mobilisations emerged in defence of clean water and the protection of rivers and glaciers against pollution, and

then, a second wave, against the consequences of agrochemical products over the health of populations.

The first wave of socio-environmental mobilisations started in the year 2003, and involved at least three paradigmatic cases in Chubut, La Rioja, and Entre Ríos (Giarracca, 2019). This happens in the context of expansion of extractivist projects in Latin America, which are based on large-scale appropriation and over-exploitation of nature with negative socio-environmental impacts (Svampa, 2019). A cycle of socio-environmental protests against mega-mining, particularly in Chubut and La Rioja[13], had an impact on the national legislative power, which enacted a law for the protection of glaciers in 2010 (Christel & Torunczyk, 2017). Then, in the province of Entre Ríos, in the same city that one of my research cases is located, a dispute against the construction of a pulp mill led to a diplomatic conflict between Argentina and Uruguay. Citizens organised under an assembly-based format led protests and roadblocks, and were able to influence public opinion favourably beyond the city (Merlinsky, 2021).

A second wave of socio-environmental mobilisations in Argentina had its epicentre in the cause against the consequences of agribusiness. The agribusiness industry is part of the extractivist model predominant in the Latin American region. Its effects have been reported to include the creation of a paradoxical model of agriculture without farmers; massive displacement of former farmers and communities in the territories; intensive use of resources such as water, fertile land, and biodiversity; increased deforestation and destruction of native forests; soil quality degradation, amongst others (Giarracca & Teubal, 2010). Under these circumstances of expansion of this neoliberalised food regime, Argentinian agriculture became concentrated in fewer large-scale

[13] It started with the organisation of an assembly of neighbours against the installation of a mining company in a town in the west of the province of Chubut. The assembly members campaigned to denounce the human and environmental consequences that this project would have, as well as the economic plundering that it entailed. This first experience laid the seeds for other localities to develop their activism against the installation of extractivist projects and in defence of public and common goods. For instance, in the province of La Rioja, communities organised against the large-scale mining projects of the Barrick Gold corporation, with the motto 'Water is more valuable than gold' (*El agua vale más que el oro*), found in several other Latin American socio-environmental conflicts. The multiplication of these socio-environmental assemblies led to the creation in 2006 of the Union of Citizen Assemblies (*Unión de Asambleas Ciudadanas*, UAC), a space for sharing experiences and debating collectively (Giarracca, 2019; Merlinsky, 2021).

firms which also restrict access to land for smaller farmers (Gras & Hernández, 2014).

Specifically, many socio-environmental groups questioned the effects on the health of communities caused by the fumigation with glyphosate. This is an herbicide extensively used as part of this agribusiness model, commercialised by the Monsanto corporation, now Bayer. Cities and towns all over the country united under the name 'Fumigated Peoples' (*Pueblos Fumigados*), calling for an end to the use of this product. These struggles multiplied after 2012, when a trial over the fumigation of a neighbourhood in the province of Córdoba became widely known. This trial followed a complaint by a group of mothers concerned about the effect on the health of their community (Barri, 2013; Cáceres, 2015; Merlinsky, 2021). These mobilisations also had a repercussion in the Entre Ríos province. Particularly in the city where one of my case studies is based, the tragic death of a child due to cancer in 2017 affected the local community, intensifying the demands to stop the use of agrotoxics (Ciancaglini, 2021). This led the municipal government to promote a local ordinance prohibiting glyphosate, and later, to design a public policy encouraging agroecology and food sovereignty initiatives.

In this context of social unrest over the consequences of the agribusiness model, new forms of popular economy initiatives linked to agroecological production started to grow in the country. In the organisation of these type of producers, the UTT gained recognition, as it brings together a large number of workers in this branch of activity, many of them migrants from neighbouring Bolivia. The UTT was created in 2008 by horticultural producers in La Plata, province of Buenos Aires, advocating for access to land for those who work it (*tierra para quien la trabaja*), agroecology[14], and direct forms of commercialisation (Unión de Trabajadores de la Tierra, 2021). However, it was after 2015 that it achieved visibility and attracted attention in the public debate for their collective actions which were innovating in its repertoire. These are the so-called *verdurazos*, in

[14] A relevant antecedent of agroecological work and the struggle for access to land in the region is that of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Rurales Sin Tierra*, MST) in Brazil. This movement has built rural settlements for production with forms of collective and assembly-based participation (Fernandes et al., 2021). Both the UTT and the MTE Rural in Argentina have ties to members of the MST, some of them travelling to Brazil to learn from their experience, as well as hosting MST activists in Argentina's workplaces.

which horticultural workers donate their vegetables to passers-by in urban public hotspots such as the *Plaza de Mayo* or the National Congress Square while publicising their causes. Reportedly, the UTT represents an estimated 20,000 families across fifteen provinces (Acero Lagomarsino, 2021).

Then, another organisation that also became significantly recognised in the public agenda in recent years is the rural branch of the MTE. It was created by the end of 2015, also by a group of horticultural producers in La Plata, to contend the effects of agribusiness in land concentration, extractivism, and the intensive use of agrochemicals for its effects on the health as well in the costs for producing. A currency devaluation and the rising inflation created difficulties for small producers, prompting them to unionise and find alternative ways of producing (MTE Rural, 2022; Shoaie Baker & García, 2021). Later, they reached more than 35,000 producers in twenty provinces (MTE Rural, 2022).Together with the UTT, they are both numerous and influential organisational experiences, with a national impact on the representation of this sector. Similarly to the UTT, the rural MTE advocates for the recognition of the right to land, the guarantee of basic labour and social rights, cooperative organisation with grassroots assemblies, agroecological forms of production, and commercialisation in local markets without intermediaries (MTE Rural, 2022; Shoaie Baker & García, 2021).

Participants from both organisations promote public policies and legislative proposals, negotiate with state institutions, and call for contentious actions in the public space to encourage the access to land for production. As part of these strategies, the initiatives I study in this thesis include the settlement of participants in misused, abandoned, and vacant public spaces. They aim to repurpose and recover these spaces from their state of idleness, in order to build agroecological workplaces. In doing so, they engage with state institutions to obtain support, achieving different levels of collaboration, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

Until now, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the literature has addressed a previous agroecological experience in former vacant urban and peri-urban public lands, created in the city of Rosario and materialised as public policy (Hammelman et al., 2022; Lattuca, 2012; Lattuca et al., 2014; Lilli, 2018; Pigini Rivas, 2016;

Sanguedolce, 2018), that participants in my case studies mention as an important reference. However, it is yet to be further explored how popular economy participants, immersed in movements that challenge processes of dispossession and extractivism, build alternative public spatialities. They do so as part of a plural mosaic of actors that also include state agencies, socio-environmental activists and NGOs. For building agroecological workplaces in public lands, they engage in a type of activism that both seeks to make a living as well as regenerate the environment and produce an inclusive form of publicness.

3.4 Defining cases: a situated approach for understanding publicness

This thesis focuses on two case studies, which are initiatives of agroecological labour of the popular economy in public spaces. The UTT and the MTE Rural participate in these initiatives. Building on the literature discussed in Chapter 2, this study seeks to explore these previously unexamined cases, progressing towards the definition of more adequate concepts that may also illuminate further research on the construction of publicness.

The two case studies are treated as the "units of narrative": the account is constructed from the initiatives as collective experiences, rather than in terms of the individual actors (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 112). I am particularly interested in the role and visions of my research participants regarding their collective action. In addition, my research approach focuses on the site of the workplaces, with the immediate networks of participants that produce these spaces. The units of analysis are the workplaces as participatory initiatives. Not, then, the movements, or the urban areas where the workplaces are located.

The aim of this research is to develop a nuanced and context-dependent view of publicness which justifies the case study approach (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stewart, 2014). The case study method can address the question of how publicness is constructed, opening up research to the diverse forms that participants in concrete geographies could create for this notion. Case studies are also the selected strategy for researching "how" questions such as the one in this thesis, as well as focusing on contemporary phenomena (Yin, 1994). The method avoids

the reproduction of concepts that may not be adequate in every context, and helps discover an alternative path, one for which the notions of space, plurality, labour, and production, are key.

For orienting my case selection process, the starting point were the broader themes that are discussed by the literature on municipalism, remunicipalisation, and public spaces, that have been reviewed in Chapter 2. These aspects include, broadly: the theme of public initiatives emerging as an alternative to neoliberalisation processes, experiences of public spaces being reclaimed, and the importance of the local scale as a site of political action and participation. These notions were considered in a broad sense, open enough to capture the particularities of the context, and considering whether these themes (alternatives to neoliberalism, political participation at the local scale, and public spatialites) could spoke to emergent and relevant phenomena in Argentina and the region. A source of inspiration was a book by Thwaites Rey et al. (2018) which helped me frame the question with these alternative notions, focusing on the idea of "disputes over the public". There, they consider forms of activism that seek to democratise publicness from a participatory and "subaltern" condition, and with the advocacy for "popular power", against the dispossession and commodification of natural resources, and against extractivist practices such as the ones that characterise the agribusiness model.

Of course, this delineates an immense number of cases, thus further criteria were needed to reduce the potential group of cases. I decided to take a look at salient public problems involving actors and demands with a considerable presence in the public agenda, that could relate to structural political and economic dynamics of the country itself. What were the public problems in present day Argentina that could become prolific terrains of social research? Certain situations can become public problems. When this happens, issues are constructed as matters of societal concern and conflict in the public arena, with different actors posing various approaches and solutions, and disputing its ownership and responsibility (Gusfield, 1981).

With these orientations in mind, I began to pay close attention to noticeable events and topics that were being discussed in national media. Understandably, the effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic were dominating all aspects of the

public discourse. The impact of the pandemic helped make visible the worsening social and economic inequalities that Argentina was experiencing. It became clear that for an enormous part of the population, the official calls to stay at home[15] were not realistic, due to the lack of means to do so, their living conditions, and their need to keep on working to provide for themselves. Over the last decade, the growth of employment levels came to a halt, and poverty rates and unemployment began to rise again, with an increase also in labour informality and alternative forms of labour that are part of the popular economy sector. The irruption of the pandemic exacerbated these trends (Benza & Kessler, 2021; Busso et al., 2022; Fernández Álvarez, Guelman, et al., 2022; Fernández Álvarez, Laurens, et al., 2022; González et al., 2022; Natalucci et al., 2022). The labour market experienced a shock due to the lockdown measures, with a reduction in the economically active population and an increase in unemployment (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2021).

In this context, more and more people resorted to community kitchens and other forms of popular organisation to ensure minimal food (Frei-Herrmann, 2020). People have been affected by the escalating inflation, and the surge of prices of essential households goods is a central topic in daily conversations (Hernández & Luzzi, 2023). A study informed that at least half of the households in Argentina lacked the means to afford healthy diets and access adequate foods for their energy needs (Giacobone et al., 2021). In fact, in this context of food crisis aggravated by the pandemic, the commercialisation of agroecological products by the UTT, the Rural MTE, and other networks, became more visible. They were advertised as healthier food with a fair price and without worker exploitation (Poggi & Pinto, 2021).

In the media, the death of Ramona Medina in May 2020 after contracting COVID was widely reported. She was an activist and worker in a community kitchen in a popular informal settlement in Buenos Aires, and had been denouncing the harsh conditions under which they were living (Buenos Aires Times, 2020d). Concurrently, another event sparking national debate was the announcement in

[15] These were announced first in March 2020 by the national government with the name Preventive and Compulsory Social Isolation (*Aislamiento Social, Preventivo y Obligatorio*, ASPO), Decree 297/2020. To stop the spread of the virus, it called the population to avoid going to their workplaces and being in public spaces.

June 2020 made by President Alberto Fernández to nationalise Vicentín, one of the largest agro-exporting companies, symbol of the agribusiness extractive economy in the country. The president announced this plan as "a step towards food sovereignty", while parties in the opposition believed the move was unconstitutional (Buenos Aires Times, 2020b). Two months later, the president surprisingly backtracked his decision, following widespread resistance from the agriculture industry (Buenos Aires Times, 2020a). While measures to improve the food crisis situation at the national level were seen as incomplete, by looking at the local level actual initiatives for the recovery of public spaces for food production can be found. These are the initiatives I study in this thesis.

Simultaneously, another prominent issue present in the public agenda related to the issue of land access for the popular sectors. As mentioned, the consolidation of the agribusiness model in Argentina is associated to processes of dispossession and displacement of local communities in favour of a land concentration trend (Barbetta, 2014; Cáceres, 2015). In July 2020, many homeless families in Guernica, a neighbourhood located in Greater Buenos Aires, occupied a piece of land and started building shelters. They were later evicted by the police. Media reported that land occupations were growing as the result of the worsening social conditions during the pandemic (Buenos Aires Times, 2020e). The event in Guernica took place within the context of scarce availability of land for the popular sectors, and the dominance of real estate development aimed at wealthier sectors of society (Ferlicca & Pedro, 2024; Venturini et al., 2021). Soon after, in October 2020, another event captured the public attention, when activists from the MTE amidst other militants, occupied rural land to build an agroecological settlement, called *Proyecto Artigas*. This land is disputed among the heirs of an elite family in the province of Entre Ríos. One of the heirs led the project, in opposition to other members of the family (Etchevehere, 2021). They ultimately failed to do so, after farming lobbies and opposition parties framed this as a test case for private property rights (Buenos Aires Times, 2020c).

In this context of growing instability, it was clear that the issues of food access, production, and sovereignty, and the lack of land for popular sectors, were key public problems to understand the emergent social panorama in Argentina. In response to this, events such as the *Proyecto Artigas* settlement were showing

that lands could become an object of dispute and occupation by popular economy labour movements for its use as workplaces for food production. In this regard, the *Proyecto Artigas* case is just the tip of the iceberg, with other cases throughout the country under the radar. Beyond the lack of depth of media coverage, it became interesting to discover what happens when movements of workers settle into spaces to build these alternative forms of food production, contesting the agribusiness model. Thus, I started identifying active experiences which could be potential case studies at the local scale in Argentina. There were movements initiating experiences of settling on unused or vacant state-owned lands, repurposed as workplace for agroecological production. But exactly how these spaces were constructed, and the implications for publicness, became a question that this thesis aims to answer.

The selection of cases was "information-oriented" (Flyvbjerg, 2006), chosen based on expectations to obtain more information on the following criteria, informed by the literature review. First, initiatives emerging as alternatives to neoliberalisation processes, involving "disputes over the public" from a "subaltern" condition, and contestations to the extractivist model dominant in Latin America (Thwaites Rey et al., 2018). Second, cases where specific public spatialities are being reclaimed, resuming the insights from the literature on public spaces (Mitchell, 2003), as well as aiming to capture the particular dynamism of local politics (Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2020). Third, experiences that could reveal the role that both the state and movements have in the production of public spatialities. This was grounded on the theorisation on the global and long-term transformation of the forms of the public, from state-centred to participatory and pluralistic (Cumbers, 2012). Fourth, cases dialoguing with the specific Argentinian context of popular and subaltern politics in the current conjuncture. This last criterion led to the discovery of the relevance of the popular economy and agroecological movements.

I therefore selected two case studies, involving initiatives of creation of workplaces of the popular economy for agroecological production. The exact location of these initiatives is not revealed in this thesis for confidentiality reasons. One is located in the province of Entre Ríos, and involves one of the major agroecological land workers' movement in the country, UTT. It also

involves the participation of the local government. The second is in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, and is a workplace managed by members of the UTEP, the popular economy confederation of the country. I particularly focus on the participation of a group of workers belonging to the Rural MTE, which as seen, is also a key agroecological movement in Argentina. I refer to the case studies by the name of the province in which they are located, Entre Ríos and Buenos Aires.

The two cases are similar in the aspect of being on state owned-land and that represent the participation of popular economy labour movements, but vary in relation to the intensity of municipal state influence on their management. In the case of Buenos Aires, there is a lesser degree of municipal state support, with participants from the UTEP taking the lead. In the Entre Ríos case, there is a higher influence from the municipal state, but also with the involvement of the UTT.

Although they are located in different provinces, both belong to the ecoregion known as the Humid Pampas (*Pampa húmeda*), a fertile and flat grassland area known for its comparative advantages for agricultural production. From the 1990s onwards, the region saw the intensification of land concentration into a few owners and monoculture production for export, mainly soybeans and wheat (Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2005). Agroecology, both as a movement and as a method (Wezel et al., 2009), emerged locally as a reaction to the expansion of these practices, catalogued under the term agribusiness, and criticised for its damaging impact on the environment and the population.

In addition, my research can be described as a cross-sectional study (Bryman, 2012) of these two instances of the construction of public spaces, situated in the post-2015 Argentinian political context. This moment is a significant point in time to understand the expansion of the popular economy pluriverse, and the generation of conditions of possibility to lead agroecological projects in public lands. In 2015, the national elections gave rise to a change in the politico-ideological orientation of the government, and the closing of the post-neoliberal or progressive phase that characterised the region during the 2000s. This period saw the growth of contentious politics in Argentina, with both UTEP and UTT being active in the protests against the effects of the policies of President Mauricio Macri and the overall decline of living standards. With resonant events

such as the UTT's *verdurazos* and CTEP's mobilisations for 'Land, Housing, and Work' (*Tierra, Techo y Trabajo*), the organisations became broadly known, and their relevance in the public arena grew. It is against this background that the emergence of the initiatives that I study can be understood.

3.4.1 Introduction to the case studies

Both initiatives emerge out of the collaboration among several actors, with the predominant participation of labour union movements of the popular economy sector. These actors build workplaces for agroecological production, oriented by a socio-environmental approach. Both of these workplaces are situated in lands owned by the state, that were formerly vacant and neglected.

One of the cases sits in the northern region of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, a densely populated urban zone characterised by its deep economic inequalities. Administratively, it is not in the city of Buenos Aires but in its surrounding region. There, participants from the MTE and the Evita Movement, currently part of the broader UTEP, created in 2015 a space where they develop alternative economic projects, among which there is an agroecological initiative for growing food and native plants for reforestation.

This workplace evolved despite the lack of support from the local government, and it is managed directly by the workers and the labour union. It has a greater degree of autonomy in its management compared to the second case study that I analyse. However, most of its funding, although scarce, comes from governmental policies active at least until the end of 2023. Mainly, from conditional cash transfer programmes coordinated by the national Ministry of Social Development under several names[16]. Besides this, the agroecological

[16] During the presidencies of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015), in 2009, the programme *Argentina Trabaja* (officially named *Ingreso Social con Trabajo*) was created to support unemployed people wishing to join cooperatives to work in the maintenance and development of local public spaces and community-based projects. A related programme, *Ellas Hacen*, was also launched in 2013 specially for women. Later, under the presidential term of Mauricio Macri (2015-2019), these programmes were unified and redenominated as *Hacemos Futuro*, shifting its focus to education and training aims for the beneficiaries. Then, with the presidency of Alberto Fernández (2019-2023), the programme changed into *Potenciar Trabajo*, which allocates funds for socio-community projects and a wage for the participants (Arcidiácono & Bermúdez, 2018; Hopp, 2018; Kasparian, 2017; Larsen & Capparelli, 2021; Mate, 2020).

project is supported by two local NGOs that provide expert support on plant cultivation and care, as well as individual volunteers.

The second case is found within the south-east of the province of Entre Ríos, in a site which is distant from the city centre. In this place, there is a nature reserve, as well as an agroecological project for cultivating vegetables, fruits, and raising farm animals. They call this site *colonia*, which is a name given by the UTT to the settlements of participants working and living together.

The city is well-known for the high level of contentious mobilisation of its population in environmental affairs, first against the building of pulp mills threatening to pollute the river that divides Argentina from its neighbouring country, Uruguay, and then, against the use of agrochemicals for its negative impact on people's health. This led, in 2018, to the prohibition of the use of the herbicide glyphosate by a municipal ordinance. In contrast to the former case of Buenos Aires, here the local government promotes a policy denominated Plan for Healthy, Safe and Sovereign Food. In connection with the plan, they support and fund the development of the site of the workplace.

The local government has a municipalist perspective, advocating for the autonomy of the city to formulate policies and a participatory mode of governance with the idea of an 'open-door' municipality. In line with this, they invited participants of the UTT to live on the premises and work. As explained above, this is a social movement recognised for its campaigns in favour of land access for agricultural workers and the agroecological perspective. They were also aided by other activist leaders specialised in environmental education and food sovereignty.

3.5 Accessing participants' constructions of publicness

I identify the approach of my research design as situated. With this, I aim to understand the significance of the phenomenon of the construction of publicness by the meanings created by social actors (Guber, 2016) *in situ*. A situated approach can provide renewed insights to a growing literature on municipalist politics and the struggles around the public, in a less explored context and conjuncture. The Argentinian context, with the emergence of the popular

economy and agroecological movements, reveals newer and different coordinates to the study of publicness. This situated approach is useful to capture the interpretations of a phenomenon in local and grounded experiences. It aims to specifically understand what the growth of the popular economy and agroecological movements in Argentina has to show to the theorisation of publicness.

In this study, interviews have been the main way of accessing participants' perceptions on what is happening in the initiatives. Interviews had a semi-structured character, allowing enough flexibility (Dunn, 2000) to let participants explain their views, and guide me as researcher across the complex contexts that give form to the initiatives. While I had a list of themes that helped me orient the questions, I also wanted to explore the way in which participants assign meanings and express their experiences in their own terms. For that reason, the list of themes (Figure 1, below) was only a tentative and broad guide open to clarification and reformulation (Guber, 2016).

I aimed to adopt an attitude of active listening, asking about the ideas that the interviewees themselves raised, and thinking about follow-up questions that would provide the interviewee more space to explain in detail particular aspects. During the first interviews, I realised how much more I needed to learn about the construction of these agroecological and labour alternatives, despite being a phenomenon happening in my own country. That initial feeling of discomfort, of feeling very little in comparison with research participants who were explaining how vast this world was, was a motivation to keep on digging. It was only after the first interviews that I was able to start formulating more clearly what was at stake in the cases and the general phenomenon, little by little revealing its complexity.

Figure 1: Interview themes

descriptions of the initiative	relations between actors	causes and demands
aims of the initiative	links between movements and state	forms of organisation and participation
motives and reasons	type of state involvement	representative processes
sequence of events	transformations over time	balance and success according to participants
relation to political and geographical context	activities developed	tensions and challenges
actors that support and oppose the initiative	key events	imagining the future

As my case studies are the initiatives, and not specifically individual participants, I focused on questions addressing group dynamics and shared understandings of the phenomenon. Interviews were done on a one-on-one basis, and while naturally, participants refer to their own experiences and perceptions, my analysis is not purely concentrated on their individual life stories but rather on the collective participation that makes sense and creates these public spaces.

The vast majority of the interviews were carried out face-to-face, using the online platform Zoom only in the cases where participants preferred it due to their commitments. Despite that, I was able to meet all participants in person at some point in the research, which I think was important to provide a sense of corporality and personhood with my presence in the field, showing them my commitment to the process, and explaining my role. For me, it was important to travel to the research sites to engage with research participants in a constructive relationship. The information that social researchers analyse are not only words, but meanings located in a context. Getting to meet actors in-person adds a layer of understanding and responsibility to the researcher, as well as gives the chance to participants to directly choose if and how to get involved in social research which analyses their experiences.

The selection of participants aimed to address the plurality and diversity of their roles in the workplaces. I interviewed workers who are members of the labour union movements, workers that are part of the municipal government and are not affiliated to these unions, government officials, NGO activists, socio-

environmental experts, and volunteers. This plurality of actors emerged over the course of the fieldwork itself, and is the focus of Chapter 4. I decided to interview the actors with a proximity to the spaces, that had been or were currently part of their everyday dynamics or had a role in the past. I focused on identifying who were the actors present on the workplaces every day, which roles did they have, and which other actors were mentioned by participants as having had a key role in the processes.

Following the identification of key roles and responsibilities within the workplaces, a "snowball" technique (Daniel, 2012) was used to contact further participants, beyond the initial participants I met directly during my first visits within the workplaces. I also interviewed participants who were no longer active participants in the workplaces, but could help me reconstruct the succession of events. In total, I interviewed 32 participants, 20 related to the Buenos Aires initiative, and 12 from the Entre Ríos one. The difference in participants corresponds to the higher number of actors present in the former case in comparison to the latter. In addition, as in Buenos Aires the two movements that participate in the workplace organise themselves in separate working groups, I decided to focus on the group of participants in charge of the garden and plant nursery of the Rural MTE. However, I also interviewed participants from the *Movimiento Evita* to have a better understanding of the dynamics within the space. A list containing more details on the interviewed participants can be found in Appendix A. Full names of participants are not revealed, and I use pseudonyms in the case where they preferred so. The names of the NGOs are also pseudonyms, due to them operating in a small scale.

Participant observations in the workplaces were a second component of this research, helping me to understand how participants' experiences are shaped by a sense of spatiality that would have been difficult to grasp solely by their descriptions in the interviews if I had never been there. During the observations, I took note of the sequence of actions that participants were involved into. These notes were later converted into digital notes for the purpose of codification. In addition, I also attended two mobilisations to understand the broader dimension of contentious politics of these labour movements in Argentina, and the vast scale of their mobilisations. One was a *verdurazo,* held

in the public park in front of the National Congress and organised by the UTT. Another was a mobilisation in 9 de Julio Avenue organised by the UTEP for Saint Cajetan (*San Cayetano*) day, patron saint of labour, which is a tradition for this union.

My subjectivity as researcher was also affected by the fieldwork experience as I became emotionally invested into it (Hume, 2007). In the beginning, I found it quite hard to let go of my anxiety about the possibility of not finding interlocutors. In the immediate aftermath of the lockdown that had me inside my cramped flat for quite a long time, I also felt anxious and awkward to go again to the outside world. However, in the end, I found happiness interacting with participants and being in these green spaces, reconnecting with the collective experience of being human in public against the isolating effect of the pandemic. Time spent with participants, seeing them work hard, and dedicating time to explaining their daily lives to me, created within me a feeling of gratitude and connection towards them. While I do not always see eye to eye with their worldview and am a little sceptical about the effectiveness of some of their beliefs, I want them to succeed in their projects. For instance, due to my agnosticism, I am less inclined to believe the biodynamic agriculture cosmology that participants incorporate to their practices, which has some magic and spiritual components. But I am a researcher, not a farmer, and my research is not interested in evaluating the validity of participants' claims regarding agricultural practices. All in all, it would emotionally affect me in a negative way if these initiatives came to an end, especially if that were for motives outside the will of participants, such as lack of funding or governmental opposition.

Particularly, one of the lessons I took from my fieldwork was the rejection of a kind of researcher positionality that reinforces epistemic extractivism (Grosfoguel, 2019). That is, research practices that extract ideas from local communities, particularly from subaltern groups, but do not engage in a dialogue. Participants are not understood as equals, and their reflexivity and agency are not taken into account. Their ideas are depoliticised, subsumed within the terms and parameters of the dominant. The context of production of these ideas, which gives full significance to them, is obscured and forgotten.

Thus, these are practices that deny agency to participants. Instead, my position is that every research project is the product of a co-construction between participants and researchers, and if it were not for the work and active engagement of the former, there would be no progress in social sciences.

I would like to quote the words from a participant, that clearly expresses an ethical rejection of extractivist practices. It is defined as an egotistical and stealing activity that cannot be tolerated by the group of participants:

> What we must do is have the intelligence to come to give and not to take. There are also people who have come here wanting to take away [from us], and look how powerful the project is, the etheric body of this project, which does not allow people to take away, it only allows those who want to contribute. Those who come to steal end up badly, they end up being expelled by the project (...) They won't be able to take away, this is a space for giving, and when you are willing to give, it will give you back, more than enough. Like life, I mean, you can always try to take from it, but if you don't understand how nature works … Nature, and here we refer to agroecology and agribusiness… you have fifty hectares, you plant soy, then you're going to take from it and put glyphosate and fertiliser. And, it will give you for a while, but it will be short. And then, it will say 'no, it's not like that' (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22).

As Diego, the participant, explains, agroecological activism involves an ethical implication to avoid forms of extractivism, and this ethic is embedded in the core of the initiatives. While in this fragment of the interview Diego referred to the actions of another person as an example, I could not help but reflect on my own position as researcher interacting with participants. Perhaps this was a way of warning me against these practices, especially considering my condition as an Argentinian researcher studying cases in my own country, but for completing a PhD in an institution in the United Kingdom.

I would like to contribute, then, to the production of a theory that remains faithful and is embedded into the specific contexts of production of these public spatialities. I also seek to acknowledge the way and terms by which participants make sense of their reality, because they are active producers of knowledge, and understand and reflect on the political dimension of their creations.

This implies considering my own politics of representation of participants' initiatives, because the ways by which social researchers represent realities has an impact on forming visions of the world. I aim to avoid representing them as Others, which is a form of epistemic subordination by which the practices of subaltern social groups are measured and evaluated in its deviancy in reference to the normative parameters of affluent Western societies (Tanesini, 2022). Conversely, this thesis aims to highlight participants' condition as participants and activists, creators and producers of public spatialities. I underline the condition of participants as active constructors of social reality in their own right, by not seeking to evaluate their practices against a preconceived norm expressing how they should behave. In this line, in the following section I describe the constructivist approach I chose to analyse the information gathered during my fieldwork.

3.6 Analysing the material

My thesis is informed by an epistemological perspective which considers that knowledge is built from the perspective of social actors that create "worlds of meaning" (Donnan & McFarlane, 1997, p. 202) to understand their reality. Social actors interpret the world and assign meanings to it, constructing the reality of their daily life (Schütz, 1953, p. 3) and orienting their actions with these interpretations. As researchers, we build "constructs of the second degree" or "constructs of the constructs" (1953, p. 3) created by the actors to explain the social world. I describe the process of building these constructs, or developing themes, in this section.

In order to conceptualise the notion of publicness from participants' constructions, I identified key themes and categories following the "analytic induction" approach. That is, I examined the collected qualitative information in search of similarities and interrelationships, to develop concepts with a higher level of abstraction (Punch, 2014). The approach for the analysis of the data collected during fieldwork is influenced by the constructivist grounded theory. It aims to build theory inductively, but without assuming that the analysis of the information is self-evident or straightforward. In interpreting the meaning from data, I, as the researcher, co-construct the meaning. This co-construction is

based on participants' constructions, but also influenced by my own academic trajectory and experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Mills et al., 2014).

For that reason, it is important to note that in practice, qualitative research cannot be purely inductive or deductive, but "cyclical" (Baxter, 2021, p. 117). My study was oriented since the beginning by literature discussions on disputes on the public at the local scale, and the need to generate alternative conceptual coordinates grounded in my context of research. Pure inductivism is not a realistic method for generating theory, as research does not happen in a vacuum devoid of theoretical influences.

Thinking about this process in terms of "abductive reasoning" offered me a way out of this impasse. Abduction enables empirical research to play a significant role in the development of theories, which is a key element in my research design. But "abductive reasoning" also recognises the need of having an interplay between data and theory, starting from the particular and relating it to broader ideas and theories from various disciplines and fields of research (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 156). In this line, I am informed by discussions not only from political studies but also from sociology, economy, anthropology, and geography, in the belief that interdisciplinarity strengthens and broadens the scope of our work.

In addition, for examining the data, I followed the analytic approach described by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) of considering the information in their status as participants' "accounts". Participants reflect on their experiences by justifying, excusing, or legitimating actions, decisions, and ways of thinking. That is, they attach positive and negative values to behaviours and ideas. Following Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) social actors have judgement capabilities, they justify and criticise actions, and legitimise certain views in detriment of other perspectives. Participants appeal to senses of worth, principles of general and common good and justice to justify their positions. Discovering how they present justifications and appeal to principles of worth in their accounts is the path to answering the research question.

Themes began to emerge after the most intensive part of my fieldwork started, in February 2022. By early April of that year, after conducting a round of

interviews and observations, I made a first list of bullet points including rough notes, ideas, and further interrogations to address. The final version of data codification in December 2023 ended up having three "core codes". It evolved from an unstructured and open patchwork of ideas, into an organised, defined, and hierarchical set of codes, which I describe in the following paragraphs. The following figure illustrate the form that the data analysis process took in initially, as an open list of points:

Figure 2: Examples of early points

state acting through informality	politics and unionism?	agroecology as a core principle for participation	social inclusion and social class
state as necessary for sustaining the popular economy	influence of NGOs - tension between logics?	daily militant work to maintain the spaces	identity as excluded and stigmatisation by society
privatisation as a latent fear	political generations, the offspring of 2001, continuity of struggles	internal organisational structures and hierarchies: guides and *referentes*	productive and commercial - tension?
state-owned lands that were abandoned	technical knowledge as a source of power	*'sin patrón'* (without employer)	being from the neighbourhood/being a migrant
building a public space as an activist work	economic and pragmatic reasons for agroecology	collective identity based on work	transformations of the self, giving meaning to life
municipality as promoter or municipality as obstructor/absence	links with agroecological movements elsewhere	criteria that enables entry as worker	premises as 'magical' places
impact of the movement/union - margin of autonomy?	environmental networks as originators of processes	being a committed worker as a source of prestige, a participatory capital	equipment and machinery as participatory work

These early points illustrate how I was concerned from the beginning with many of the elements that appear now as main themes in my thesis. However, they appeared as ideas to keep on digging, and that did not have a structure of interrelations or hierarchy.

This list of open and provisional ideas was expanded into notes I took into separate documents while transcribing the interviews and reading the transcripts. Finally, once I had all my interviews transcribed, along with the field notes, I started a systematic process of writing analytical notes or memos to quotes (Charmaz, 2006; Cope, 2021; Punch, 2014). These memos were written in the margins of the documents using the comments function on Word. Memos

both describe and highlight elements about what the interviewee is saying, or is happening, add possible interpretations of the data to explore theoretical possibilities, and make connections to other ideas. Memos serve both descriptive and analytic functions, they contextualise, and establish patterns and connections (Cope, 2021).

I wrote memos in the beginning, but not yet specific codes. These memos allowed me to dig deeper and open up possibilities in the analysis of the data, because I avoided the hurry of assigning a code of a single or few words during the first readings. This is because theory is not merely built by aggregating and ordering codes, but engaging in the creative work of trying out and linking possible ideas (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 142). It also helps to understand ideas in its context. This creative process was done in Spanish, which is both my native language as well as the language in which the interviews were carried out.

These notes then were grouped into fewer broader categories or second-degree codes that identify patterns in data as well as interconnections between the two cases. This grouping process brings together fragments of data that relate to the same particular theme (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Some quotes were labelled with more than one code. This is the selective or focused phase of coding, which aims to integrate and synthesize the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Then, to help visualising and assembling the information, I used the “concept mapping” (Cope, 2021) or “data display” (Punch, 2014) technique of grouping these codes into mind maps, creating a visual hierarchy of ideas from the more abstract to the less ones. Finally, I assigned broader encapsulating dimensions or “core codes” of higher order (Punch, 2014) that also help structure the following chapters of this thesis. The more abstract character of these “core codes” aims to engage with concepts that could be potentially applicable to further cases, enhancing the potential “transferability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1990) of the research to other cases.

This analytical strategy allowed me to notice and elaborate relevant themes for answering the question on the forms of publicness that participants create. The interconnection between cases can be observed by examining these themes. As

shown in Figure 3, there are three “core codes”. First, plurality, a theme that is discussed in Chapter 4, to explain how publicness is constructed in plural, by several kinds of actors. Second, as analysed in Chapter 5, the centrality of work as a theme to conceptualise a labour-oriented form of publicness. Third, covered in Chapter 6, the spatial dimension of the construction of publicness, which in the cases analysed is tied to productive and socio-environmental commitments.

As I show in the next three chapters, there are shared patterns and commonalities between the two case studies, and also some elements that are more present in one of the cases, or that present differences within a common theme. For instance, the two cases involve the participation of different kinds of actors, some not present in both. In writing up this thesis, I follow the strategy of presenting the information by focusing on these themes’ commonalities first and foremost, and then detailing the specificities and differences, if they are present, in each case.

Figure 3: List of codes

Core codes	Second-degree codes
Plurality	Environmental activisms in the city
	Previous activist experiences
	Government administrations
	Actors that motivate participation
	Unionising: organising for the resolution of labour needs
	Previous experiences of contact/connection with nature
Work	Job opportunities, job creation, profession and craft
	Knowledge, studies, profession
	Economic improvement
	Commercial practices
	Land struggles
	Way of working (and *compañerismo*)
Spatiality	Restoration, habitability and well-being at the space
	Space availability
	City life
	Everyday habits, well-being in everyday life
	Relation between production and ecological restoration
	Usages of the past
	Education and demonstration
	New generations
	Oppositions

Finally, the examination of the case studies aims to critically appraise the adequacy of existing theories against empirical reality, by capturing the micro-sociological realities at play and the points of view of the participants, based on

close observations in real time and space (Auyero, 2012). In this vein, following Balbi (2017), comparing cases can be useful to identify and analyse continuities between the cases, and not only their diverse features. Rather than being overly particularistic, that is, emphasising what makes each case special and distinctive, it is a matter of establishing connections and common ground. For that reason, the following chapters present the cases in an interconnected manner, primarily guided by common themes that appear in the two initiatives, and explain the differences or particularities when needed.

3.7 Conclusions

This thesis is guided by a qualitative and situated methodological approach. This implies that I aim to theorise on the constructions of forms of publicness by identifying and analysing the meanings that participants in my two case studies create. These meanings are actors' interpretations of their participation and involvement in the making of workplaces in public spaces. These are meanings that make sense in the particular socio-political and geographical context of the case studies, the post 2015 Argentina, where movements of the popular economy and their choice for an alternative agroecological production have gained relevance.

I focus my view on local and grounded experiences, concrete workplaces where I conducted an *in situ* fieldwork. The results reflect this situated approach: by focusing the view on these concrete experiences, I discover locally grounded forms of creating publicness. The situated qualitative approach helps discovering alternative conceptual avenues for understanding the transformations of the forms of publicness in our era.

I use semi-structured interviews as my main research method, which is supported by participant observations in the two workplaces built by participants. By employing these methods, I collected information that provides the basis for understanding how publicness is constructed in state-owned spaces where agroecological projects of popular economy are unfolded.

My analysis of the collected data is understood as interpretations of the interpretations shared by participants. The analysis technique followed a

constructivist grounded theory approach, by which I describe and examine patterns and interrelationships in the qualitative information with the aim of building concepts. I started with the writing of descriptive and analytical memos to the formulation of codes with a higher degree of abstraction.

I realised that my reasoning behind the analysis has an abductive feature. This means that while the main objective is to build theory from the information collected during the fieldwork, in the analytic process there is an interplay of data and theories that I have read and have influenced my thoughts. Particularly, the research on local politics, public spaces, and the later incorporation of social and popular economy theories and studies on agroecological movements and urban agriculture initiatives, which have been reviewed in Chapter 2.

The current chapter also helps situating the reader in the research context of the Argentinian case studies in the provinces of Entre Ríos and Buenos Aires. Four criteria provide the rationale behind the case selection. These cases are instances of disputes over the public that contest and provide alternatives to the dominance of the extractivist economic model in Argentina, and broadly in Latin America. They particularly relate to the socio-political Argentinian context in this regard, because popular economy and agroecology are responses to the prevalence of extractivism. They also involve the reclamation and reconstruction of local public spatialities. Additionally, they are participatory initiatives that involve both the state and workers' social movements in different ways.

With this chapter, I describe the situated approach used in my study to address what is happening in the cases selected. I also introduce the milieu where my two cases are situated. This is a context of growing relevance of a form of participation and social mobilisation in support of popular economy and agroecological initiatives.

The subsequent chapters build on this foundation as they present the findings of my research by digging into the empirical material, revealing the plural, labour-oriented, and spatial dynamics of publicness.

Chapter 4 The public as plural: more than the state, more than movements

4.1 Introduction

This chapter initiates a series of three empirical chapters that present my thesis' findings. Here I begin with the conceptualisation of publicness as plural. This is a dimension that I propose to understand the form of publicness that is constructed in the popular economy and agroecological initiatives studied. I describe the different groups of actors that participate in the construction of two public spaces. I focus on two contemporary case-studies at the municipal scale, one located in the province of Buenos Aires, and the other in Entre Ríos, in Argentina. Both cases crucially show the involvement of a variety of actors for the development of these public settings, from labour union movements and environmental activists, to the state.

The notion of plurality is inspired by Arendt (1958)'s conceptualisations of the public and the political. For her, the political action is about being together, about the co-presence of others in public. For that reason, it is also an action in plural, where participants act together but at the same time "everybody sees and hears from a different position" (1958, p. 57). In this chapter, I show that this plural engagement emerges as a result of the activity of seeking coincidences and cooperative bonds between different groups to give life to the initiatives. Participation enables dialogues between different groups: labour unions, government officers, and environmental activist groups. This plurality is what makes these projects possible, working together in order to create the workplaces, despite not existing a perfect consensus and alignment of positions.

The chapter is divided into five sections. First, Section 4.2 presents the different roles and groups of participants within each setting. In Entre Ríos, there are workers, some employed by the municipal government, and some belonging to the UTT. There are also local government officials, and external environmental experts who act as advisors. In Buenos Aires, most participants are workers, all belonging to the UTEP, in particular, the MTE and the Evita Movement. There is a second modality of participation there, volunteers, who help with gardening activities and do not have a collective affiliation. Then, there are NGO activists,

who take the role of trainers. Section 4.2 introduces the mosaic of participants before detailing their role in the initiatives.

Section 4.3 focuses on the labour union movements. It shows how workers frame their participation around their belonging to the labour unions UTT and UTEP, and indicates these movements' role in the initiatives. Section 4.4 is dedicated to the context of environmental activism where these initiatives are situated. It considers the links the workplaces have with the network of environmental associations and practices in the regions where these are located. In this section I also show how the participation of a plurality of actors can entail different perspectives. Actors can hold different positions on how to run the workplaces, and a consensus cannot be presupposed. The idea of a plurality with tensions is illustrated with the example of workers in Buenos Aires disputing leadership with NGO activists over who should take the lead of the workplace.

The final section before the chapter's conclusion deals with the role of different levels of government in the construction of the workplaces. I consider how both cases can be conceptualised as situated in different points of a continuum between top-down and bottom-up politics, in relation to the degree of state involvement. The case of Entre Ríos is situated closer to the first point, and Buenos Aires, to the latter. Then, I observe how a degree of support from governmental programmes is vital for the creation and growth of these projects. All in all, I consider that currently the state involvement is not enough to sustain the workplaces, needing the involvement of actors beyond the state.

4.2 A plural mosaic of participants

In each case, there are three different group of actors that participate in the workplaces. They can be differentiated according to their role and collective membership. It is useful to think about these groups as a plural mosaic of participants. The idea of mosaic draws from Munck (2020). He utilises this term to show the broadness and variety of social movements currently active in Latin America. Here, I make use of this concept to also include other actors. The concept of mosaic aids in understanding the variegated actors that, rather than act fragmentarily, cooperate and form links in support of a wider socio-environmental cause that combines popular economy and agroecology.

In Entre Ríos, we can find the following participants:

Figure 4: Types of participants in the Entre Ríos case

Type of participant	*Workers*	*Government officials*	*External advisors*
Collective membership	UTT and municipal government employees	Municipal government	Diverse
Tasks	Livestock farming, food crops cultivation, general maintenance, reserve park ranger, guided tours, biodiversity research, commercialisation, etc.	In charge of local policy: Plan of Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food	Collaboration with the formulation of the Plan of Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food

First, there are workers that perform different tasks in the site of the initiative, such as farmers who grow and cultivate crops and raise livestock, as well as a park ranger, and a foreman (*capataz*). The site is structured to function both as a *colonia*[17] and as a reserve: a *colonia* of workers that produce food, and a reserve dedicated to the environmental conservation of the native woodland and river area.

In this case, workers are either directly employed by the municipal government, or, alternatively, have gotten their position in relation to their participation in the UTT. The labour union movement has agreed with the local government to form a settlement in the site. Each worker has a hectare of land allocated to grow vegetables. Second, there are local government officials in charge of the implementation of the Plan of Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food. This is a local public policy that supports and finances the *colonia* and reserve as part of its aims. These government officials work in the municipal government area of Social Development, Environment and Health. I also identify a third group of supporting actors, a group of professionals in environmental topics. They do not reside in the town. Rather, they act as external advisors. Their role was especially prominent during the formulation phase of the Plan.

In Buenos Aires, there are also three distinguishable types of participants. However, these are different from the ones in Entre Ríos, which implies that the

[17] *Colonia* is the name that UTT gives to collective settlements of land workers, and this is one of the cases. At the same time, the use of term *colonia* to designate agricultural settlements is part of the history of the Entre Ríos province (Djenderedjian, 2008).

plural manifestations of publicness can be formed by different kinds of participants in each context.

Figure 5: Types of participants in the Buenos Aires case

Type of participant	*Workers*	*NGO trainers*	*Volunteers*
Collective membership	UTEP: MTE and Evita Movement	Two NGOs: *Creciendo* and *Semillas*[18]	Diverse/Non organised
Tasks	Garden and plant nursery, communication and commercialisation, guiding volunteers, general maintenance, etc.	Training and advising workers in garden and plant nursery techniques	Helping workers, learning

Workers are in charge of growing a garden and a native plant nursery. There are also other workers who are responsible for coordination roles. All of them belong to the UTEP, formerly CTEP. UTEP is a conglomerate of movements of workers of the popular economy sector. In the case under study, the workplace counts with the participation of both the MTE and the Evita Movement. Due to each movement working separately and under different productive and agroecological projects, I focus on the experience of the MTE workers. However, members of the Evita Movement have also been interviewed in regard to the general setting of the workplace.

Besides the workers, there is also a group of NGO activists, who take an educational and expert role in relation to the workers. They train the workers in aspects related to the garden and nursery management. There are two different NGOs. One of them, *Creciendo*, focuses on the management of the food garden, while the other, *Semillas*, is concentrated on the native plant nursery. Additionally, there are volunteers who help with the gardening activities. They do not have a particular collective affiliation, but rather participate on an individual basis. They do not need to adhere to a specific timetable, and do not receive a salary[19]. There are no local government officials being actively involved as participants of the garden and native plant nursery.

[18] The names of the NGOs are pseudonyms.

[19] The same individuals can become a different kind of participant over time. This is evidenced in Buenos Aires, for instance, in the trajectories of participants such as Ezequiel and Eliana. They started as volunteers and then took two new job posts that had opened within the plant nursery (Interview with Eliana, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/04/22; Interview with Ezequiel,

The following table synthesises the mosaic of participants of the two cases:

Figure 6: Types of participants in Buenos Aires and Entre Ríos' cases

	Entre Ríos	*Buenos Aires*
Labour movements	UTT	UTEP
Municipal state	Municipal government and workers	
Environmental activism	Advisors	NGOs and volunteers

4.2.1 Workers, local government officials, and external advisors

In the Entre Ríos setting, there are in total eight workers with allocated roles. Three belong to the UTT and the rest are employed by the municipality, but not affiliated to the union. Every worker is responsible for certain type of tasks. For instance, Andrés is in charge of livestock farming. He uses the management method of "rational grazing"[20], as well as being in charge of commercialising the food produce in the local market. Nacho is the reserve park ranger. He leads guided school tours, and conducts research on the animal species in the area (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 25/11/22).

Although each worker has specific responsibilities, they also work together in different tasks depending on the practical objectives they plan weekly. They call this collective form of working '*minga*'[21]. Some tasks are done together, in group, because, as they argue, if they were to be done individually, it would cost them more time and effort (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22). For them, this makes labour "much more collaborative, less

worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22). Additionally, Diego started as an NGO trainer. He was a member of *Semillas*, but later decided to abandon their position in the NGO to become a full time worker of the project and member of the MTE labour union movement (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22).

[20] Workers use a "rational grazing" method called "Voisin" where cows graze in an area of land and their faeces serve as natural fertiliser to the land. This technique improves soil fertility by providing nitrogen, phosphorous and other nutrients "respecting the natural ecosystem" (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22). It is described by the specialised literature as an alternative and regenerative livestock system that has a positive environmental footprint, improves animal welfare, and motivates farmers to engage with the ecological processes involved in their work (Pinheiro Machado Filho et al., 2021)

[21] *Minga* is a Quechuan word which describes a collective effort within a local community to participate to achieve a common project, such as building a house or harvesting a crop. It is used in diverse ways in other Latin American contexts. See Murillo (2009) for the case of Colombia. In my study, participants refer with this word to the moments of collective work, to indicate a contrast with the moments of individual work.

sacrificed" and also feasible: some tasks cannot be done "alone, in isolation" (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22).

Emilio is the foreman (*capataz*) of the team of workers. He is in charge of overseeing the workplace, and communicating the team of workers with the municipal government. He notes workers' issues, needs, and difficulties, and redirects these to government officials (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 25/11/22). He also mentions being in charge of channelling the necessities and assignments in the daily work. That is, if there is a certain objective that the group wants to achieve, he oversees the how, and organises the group's effort (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22).

Mateo is a worker who has been assigned a plot of land for cultivating food crops. He participates in the UTT. As part of the local food sovereignty policy, local government officials made a call for workers with expertise in agroecological methods. For that reason, they contacted the UTT, given the labour union movement's recognition in its advocacy for agroecology. This call resonated with Mateo's experience in the UTT as an agroecological technician. In the promotion of agroecological methods, UTT created Co.Te.Po, which is a network of workers who provide technical support to their peers[22]. Mateo is part of this network. He is from Bolivia and was living in Buenos Aires, when he heard about this project and decided to move to Entre Ríos (Interview with Mateo, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/02/22).

The setting of the reserve and *colonia* is part of a broader city public policy called Plan of Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food, hereafter the Plan. Based on the principles of food sovereignty, one of it aims is the promotion of agroecology in the municipality's region. The Plan is implemented by the governmental area of Social Development, Environment, and Health (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22), which has different subareas such as Environment, in charge of Camila and Bárbara, and Social Economy, managed by

[22] These kinds of peer support networks are common within the Latin American agroecological movement. One of the earliest and more known examples is the Peasant to Peasant (*Campesino a Campesino*) method carried out by farmers in Cuba. This horizontal method of knowledge-sharing helped Cuba to find alternative ways of producing food after the crisis caused by the US trade embargo and the dissolution of the USSR (Rosset et al., 2011).

Alberto. Camila is a lawyer, specialised in Environmental Law, Bárbara is a technician in Environmental Health (Interview with Camila, government official, Entre Ríos, 01/12/22), and Alberto is an industrial and labour engineer (Interview with Alberto, government official, Entre Ríos, 30/11/22).

Besides the workers and government officials, a key group of actors are the external advisors. They are described by attributes of expertise in environmental issues as well as by their activist commitment to the agroecological movement in Argentina. Camila explains that the "theoretical concept" and "spirit" of the Plan owes a great deal to these advisors who "are not municipal workers, but collaborated because of their trajectory", a trajectory that she understands is "even global"[23]. She describes them with phrases like "great agroecology activist", "specialist in environmental education", "lawyer who defends food sovereignty", or "renowned nutritionist who devoted their life to the fight for food sovereignty" (Interview with Camila, government official, Entre Ríos, 01/12/22). Damián is one of these participants. He defines himself as a lawyer in human rights and food sovereignty, a university professor, and a member of multiple activist groups that support agroecology and food sovereignty in the country and at the Latin American level (Interview with Damián, external advisor, 13/07/22). Eduardo is also one of the external advisors. He sees his participation as a form of collaboration for the sake of helping the project grow and loving the idea, and not because of monetary compensations. He remembers being contacted by the project coordinator, back when it was an emerging idea: "I didn't ask how or when, if you're going to pay me, if you're not going to pay me, 'yes, yes, come on, let's do it'" (Interview with Eduardo, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 29/11/22).

4.2.2 Workers, NGO trainers, and volunteers

Workers in the Buenos Aires case are connected by their collective membership in the labour union. Their participation makes sense in the framework of the "larger organisation" with collective aims (Interview with Ezequiel, worker,

[23] The agroecological movement involves a wide and global network of supporting actors. Specialised literature on agroecology has studied the aims and strategies of these actors on the international arena. See, for instance: Desmarais, 2008; Giraldo and Rosset 2018; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010; and Rosset et al., 2019.

Buenos Aires, 24/06/22) as popular economy workers. UTEP defines popular economy as formed by workers who are excluded from the conventional capitalist labour market and decide to "invent" their own job, without employers, an idea reflected in their motto "*sin patrón*" (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014). For participants, this trait makes the initiative distinct from other environmental projects. While most of these projects are constituted by people belonging to the middle and upper classes, this one is led by working class people of the lower socioeconomic level (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22). This characteristic differs from a common feature of urban community gardens, which is the dominance of middle-class participants and the reliance on volunteer participation (St Clair et al., 2020).

There are thirteen participants working collectively on the garden and plant nursery. In contrast, in Entre Ríos, participants like Mateo have an individual plot assigned for growing their crops and selling them in the municipal market. The space available in the Buenos Aires setting is considerably smaller, and groups of workers collectively share the available plots for growing their plants.

Before the creation of the food garden and native plant nursery, MTE coordinators contacted one of the NGOs, *Semillas*. The labour union was interested in hiring trainers in food gardening methods for tutoring a group of workers. *Semillas* proposed an alternative: to train the workers in the building of a native plant nursery, which was their specialisation. In addition, they suggested contacting another NGO, *Creciendo*, who could provide specific training on urban food gardening (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 25/03/22; Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 25/02/22). Both NGOs recognise themselves as "allied organisations in the same network" of local environmental organisations dedicated to the promotion of agroecology. They are dedicated to these two different areas, native plants on the one hand and food gardening on the other (Interview with Tatiana, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 30/03/22).

The influence of both NGOs can be seen in the evolution of the project as both producing native plants and a food garden. Workers are organised in two different subgroups, one dedicated exclusively to the native plant nursery and the other to the garden. Both subgroups have some degree of autonomy of task

organisation in relation to the other. For example, each subgroup debates on the tasks to be performed each day during an early morning brief joint dialogue. But other broader decisions such as the seasonal garden planning, where they consider which kind of crops they are going to grow in the following months, are subject to debate in assemblies where all the workers participate (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22; Interview with Santiago, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 29/06/22). In addition, the entire team is organised into an "external disk" of all workers and an "internal disk" comprised of a subgroup of longer-time participants which take the operative, "directorial" (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/08/22) or "global" decisions (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22). Workers such as Emilio in Entre Ríos and Diego in Buenos Aires take coordination roles, but they do not abandon manual tasks. It should be noted that the existence of coordinating roles is a frequent occurrence in actually existing workers' self-managed initiatives (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007; Kasparian, 2020; Rebón, 2005).

A third mode of participation is that of the volunteer. They are interested in developing their gardening knowledge (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/07/22; Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 04/06/22). They are also concerned by environmental issues, and feel the needing to jump into action, concretely getting their hands dirty to "know it is possible" (Interview with Andrea, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 15/07/22) to make a change. The participation of volunteers allows workers to have more opportunities for knowledge collaboration as well as to make labour less arduous (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22). Moreover, volunteers come in search of meeting new people and fostering connections with other participants (Interview with Ivana, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 27/07/22). Many volunteers learned about the existence of the project through the promotion made by the NGOs (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/07/22).

Volunteers do not identify themselves with the notion of worker. Andrea, one of the volunteers, describes the initiative as "generative of opportunities" for people facing a difficult socio-economic situation:

> It's like giving air to those who believe that everything is lost and that their life has no meaning, because I imagine that there must be many

> people who are depressed because of the lack of possibilities, (…) because of the constant ceiling that they hit. And it's like giving a break, like giving a push, right? to those people who historically and familiarly come from generation to generation, not having the opportunities that other people do (Interview with Andrea, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 15/07/22).

She does not consider herself as such, and acknowledges that she is "in a privileged situation compared to other people" due to having studies and a home (Interview with Andrea, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 15/07/22). This situates volunteers in a different social class in comparison to the labour union workers. In line with the literature on volunteer participation in urban gardening (St Clair et al., 2020), volunteers in the Buenos Aires case are described as participants that have enough free time to participate without receiving a monetary compensation, a time that they "donate" to the project when they can, "spontaneously" (Interview with Tatiana, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 30/03/22). In contrast to workers, volunteers' participation is more flexible, and they do not have to follow a schedule. As one volunteer says,

> well, it's really something that comes completely from oneself, from liking it, from desire, and not any kind of obligation. Also, if one day I can't come, I won't come, you see? Or if one day I feel like sleeping a bit longer, I sleep a little longer because I can, because it's like, like there's tons of freedom in volunteering (Interview with Ivana, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 27/07/22).

They also have room to choose the tasks they want to perform and experiment (Interview with Tatiana, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 30/03/22).

However, the participation of volunteers is not dominant in this case. The initiative does not depend primarily on their participation for its subsistence, in contrast to other urban gardens (Biewener, 2016).

Up until this section I introduced the plural mosaic of actors that compose these participatory spaces. I considered the different kind of participants that are specific to each setting. Not all types of participants are present in both cases, which suggests how publicness in each case is composed of different people that collaborate in the production of the workplaces. The recipe for publicness has no fixed ingredients, but varies according to each local context.

Next, I delve into one of the collective actors that shape publicness in these participatory settings: the labour union movements of the popular economy.

4.3 The invention of jobs: participation in labour union movements

In the previous chapters, I indicated the growing importance of the popular economy movement in the Argentinian context. The labour union movements involved in this thesis' case studies, UTEP and UTT, have an active role in the representation of popular economy workers. They are widely known in the public agenda due to their active role in massive demonstrations, debates on the media, and influence in public policies and law proposals.

The vitality of labour unions in Argentina as a form of organisation, even beyond the traditional employee sector (Abal Medina, 2016), indicates the key role that they have played in the country, historically, in the defence of workers' rights. They are central to accomplishing social protection, and of shaping a class identity (Atzeni & Grigera, 2019).

In 2011, the MTE and the Evita Movement decided to create an encompassing labour organisation, the CTEP, an effort that was also joined by other movements. The decision to form a labour union allowed the movements, as Rach (2021) describes, to politically articulate and synthesise fragmented labour experiences emerging as an effect of neoliberal policies, and strengthen their capacity to demand in favour of rights recognition for the workers. The CTEP was renamed UTEP in 2019 to include new movements. The UTT was also part of CTEP in the past (Rach, 2021), but currently they do not highlight this affiliation compared to the emphasis that both the Evita Movement and MTE assign to their belonging to the broader UTEP.

The rise of popular economy as an alternative way of economic organisation is conceptualised in CTEP's book "Organization and Popular Economy" ("*Organización y Economía Popular*"), hereafter the Blue Book, due to the colour of its cover (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014). The book explains the emergence of popular economy as a result of the transformations of contemporary capitalism that excludes people from the labour market. The decline of the wage relation

as a means of integration to society, leads to the search for alternative, self-managed ways of making a living beyond the employer-employee formal relation. Movements advocate in favour of the figure of worker to designate themselves, though not being employees.

UTEP is organisationally divided into different activity branches (*ramas*). The union has national representatives of the different branches called *responsables de rama*, as well as a secretariat body (*secretariado*). There are also *responsables de rama* (people in charge of developing the branch) at the regional level (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014). The Rural branch is the one that corresponds to my case study in Buenos Aires. There are other branches such as the one that organises waste pickers, another for textile workers, construction workers, or the socio-community branch which includes different care activities at the neighbourhood scale such as community kitchens or educational spaces for children.

Workers in agricultural activities in the popular economy sector face several difficulties, including barriers to land access and ownership, elevated rental fees, low income levels, exploitation by property owners, lack of adequate means of production, and the substantial cost of agricultural inputs (MTE Rural, 2022; Unión de Trabajadores de la Tierra, 2021). Under these conditions, one of the strategies of these labour movements is to set up collective agroecological workplaces. There, participants can have access to a piece of land in common and improve their conditions of production. In the case of the UTT, as mentioned, they call these workplaces *colonias*.

In regards to the UTT, they have their own form of internal organisation. They establish base groups (*grupos de base*) at the local scale which meet monthly in assemblies to discuss labour problems emerging in their daily work. Each base group name delegates (*delegados*) which form part of a regional assembly, and then, a national assembly once a year (Interview with Rocío, worker, 20/09/21). In Entre Ríos, Andrés is the delegate of producers of the municipal area (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

UTEP's conceptualisations of popular economy place a strong emphasis on the idea of workers' "inventing their own job" in the current exclusionary capitalist

society (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014). This idea is also frequently mentioned by participants in my case study. Luciano, who used to be the regional rural branch *responsable* (person in charge) affirms that this is a challenge, because there is no theory prescribing what to do, and rather, what matters most is the practice itself of creating these alternative work modalities. He says "it's pure praxis". He also explains what it means to be excluded and having to "invent their own job":

> We are the workers who are of no use to the system. Before, we were useful to them, even if only to exploit us. Now, we are of no use to them, not even to exploit us. There are so many of us, technology has advanced so much, and the workforce has been so reduced, that they don't even want to exploit us anymore. So, all these people, all of us who are left out of the formal labour circuit, we need to eat and live. So, we went out to invent our jobs, and we went out to invent a way to bring bread to our homes. And as people who invented our bread, we formed what is today the popular economy (Interview with Luciano, worker, Buenos Aires, 28/03/22).

Their efforts are not defensive attempts for inclusion in the labour market, but are directed towards reimagining what labour means (Dinerstein, 2014). Being excluded from central forms of capitalism and experiencing material deprivation did not lead to inaction. Rather, it prompted the creation of alternative ways of working and organising in labour movements.

Specifically in the geographical context of the Buenos Aires case study, the concept of "invention" is understood by them as a challenge to create an agroecological project within the urban setting of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (Interview with Luciano, worker, Buenos Aires, 28/03/22).

A first difficulty had to do with the available knowledge at the start of the initiative. Workers had a green space that they thought was ideal for creating a garden, but they lacked previous experience in agriculture, in contrast to other popular economy activities such as waste picking or construction, which are more common in an urban setting. MTE's Rural branch was more developed in periurban and rural settings, but not all of that experience was applicable for urban participants in my case study (Interview with Lucía, worker, 05/03/22; Interview with Luciano, worker, Buenos Aires, 28/03/22). Lucía, one of the workers, argues that in the city, new generations have lost the "rural culture" that their grandparents had. Thus, they observed that they lacked the

experience that other co-workers could provide, workers with more experience in growing techniques[24] (Interview with Lucía, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/03/22). For that reason, they decided to invite members of two NGOs to participate in the project. The idea was that the NGOs could share their knowledge with the workers.

A parallelism can be established in regard to the case of Entre Ríos, where the experience of workers such as Mateo provides the project with a reservoir of knowledge that became crucial to make the space grow. Mateo had already an extensive experience as land worker and technician from the Co.Te.Po. network. In the case of Entre Ríos, it was the local government that contacted the UTT, which they identified as a movement that could provide the necessary expertise. Thus, in this case, there was no need to contact an external NGO. Workers themselves established their own peer-based knowledge sharing activity. However, the role of the NGOs in the Buenos Aires case was not developed with the same peer-based perspective. This is explained in the following section.

In Buenos Aires, the creation of the collective workplace traces its origins back to the end of 2015. Workers who were beneficiaries of the national social programme Argentina Works (*Argentina Trabaja*), were assigned there to do basic maintenance work. But they became afraid of losing their income, which promoted their affiliation into the Evita Movement. This was due to the fears brought by the change in the political orientation of the government, after the election of Mauricio Macri as President (Interview with Matías, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/04/22). In an uncertain context, the Evita Movement decided to focus their efforts on rebuilding and reconverting the public site, which was in a state of neglect. Thus, local representatives of the Evita Movement called MTE workers to help them with the endeavour, and started creating new productive projects (Interview with Lucía, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/03/22). Before starting their participation at the site of the case study's workplace, local MTE participants mostly worked in a community kitchen (Interview with Luciano, worker, 28/03/22). The reconstruction of the public space allowed both

[24] Lucía specifically compares their experience to the Garden Parks (*Parques Huerta*) in the city of Rosario, which is a case of reference for agroecological activists in the country. In Rosario, workers were migrants from rural areas of the country, and they already had an expertise on how to make a garden grow (Interview with Lucía, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/03/22).

movements to expand the range of productive activities as well as the number of workers.

In the Entre Ríos case study, UTT started developing as a labour union in connection with the issue of product commercialisation. Local agriculture producers lacked a well-organised sales place. So, they self-organised a collective fair in a local square. This prompted a later negotiation with local authorities to formalise their situation. Now, in the Municipal Market, they sell UTT regional products, as well as all of the fruits and vegetables produced at the *colonia* workplace (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

Andrés, who has an active role in the local base group, mentions how they discovered then that being together with other producers made them stronger to petition authorities for better working conditions. He realised the importance of collective action for progressing in the recognition of rights.

> We began to see that unity was strength. To tell you the truth, me, alone, if I went to ask for something alone to an institution or something like that, they would have brushed me off, but when four or five families of producers went, it's like we had more weight (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

After the public recognition that UTT took during protests in Buenos Aires city, in 2017 the municipal government contacted the union and invited them to participate in setting up the *colonia*. This connected to the demand for land that producers had in Buenos Aires. Mateo was one of the workers in that situation. He decided to migrate to Entre Ríos to take part in the *colonia* (Interview with Mateo, worker, Entre Ríos, 20/04/22).

The participation of labour union movements constitutes one of the mosaics that make possible the creation and development of these agroecological workplaces. Moving forward, in the next section I turn the attention to the links that are established in these initiatives to the socio-environmental context of mobilisation at the local level.

4.4 “Blowing a dandelion”: the socio-environmental local activist networks

In this section I explain how the cases are immersed in local contexts of blossoming socio-environmental activism. The formation and development of the workplaces is to a great deal explained by the links with these wider networks of activist groups. These networks fulfil the role of supporting actors or previous experiences that orientate and influence the characteristics that the cases exhibit. These links to broader environmental activist networks configure the form of publicness that these cases display as plural.

The convergence between labour movements, state agencies, and environmental groups is made possible thanks to their shared interest in the causes of environmental restoration and agroecology. However, their visions regarding how participation should be and how the workplace is to be managed are not always corresponding, leading to tensions between these groups of participants. I observe these tensions particularly in the Buenos Aires case study, where understandings of participation are not always consonant between members of the NGOs and labour union workers.

Participants from both experiences can be understood in their role of promoters of collaborative and supporting networks of socio-environmental actors, networks where they are immersed. In order to make the spaces real and functioning workplaces, they engage in collaborative work with other activist groups, sharing information and resources regarding their shared environmental interests.

First, participants in Buenos Aires take part in a network of native plant nurseries, and another network of urban gardens, where they engage with several actors. This includes university professors specialised in the topic, managers of botanic gardens, and technicians from the National Agricultural Technology Institute. This has proven particularly useful as this allows participants to access resources such as native seeds of different species, as well as to attend and organise workshops, and even get contacts of possible clients (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 25/02/22; Interview with Mariano, worker, Buenos Aires, 07/07/22). This is relevant for the workers, considering

the challenges they face to 'invent their own job'. They need to create a cooperative workplace from scratch, get the necessary means of production, and sell their products.

In addition to the knowledge and commercial aspects that the collaboration with these broader networks provide, participants consider that overall, "it is also important to have contacts, links, to generate a network of people who are on the same frequency, to start to make people aware so that they feel the need and the urgency of the situation" regarding the environment (Interview with Mariano, worker, Buenos Aires, 07/07/22). Thus, being immersed in these broader networks also has a collective and activist emotional dimension. This is, to feel that there are other people pushing forward into the same direction, concerned in spreading the word on the need to care for the environment.

Another source of influence in the case of Buenos Aires comes from previous activist experiences in the nearby urban region that, like them, connect the advocacy for environmental protection with the cause of defending and recovering public spaces. The Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area is a region of ongoing socio-environmental conflict, with several collectives that have emerged to defend green public spaces. These collectives are organised with assembly dynamics and resist the privatisation of these spaces to real estate developers (Aizcorbe et al., 2013; Paschkes Ronis, 2013).

Participants from *Semillas*, one of the involved NGOs, actively participated in the recovery of an abandoned public green space located next to the river coast and the public university campus. There, they set up an "ecovillage" and a community plant nursery. The group cleaned the area and helped restore the native species. The place also functioned as a "knowledge hub" of the permacultural movement[25]. (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 25/03/22). Though the activist collective recovered the space, they were later evicted by the police after a request from university authorities. This experience functioned as a catalyst for these participants, as it helped open their eyes to

[25] Permaculture is an approach that emerged during the 1970s in Australia. It questions contemporary urban life and promotes, for land management design, the reduction of non-renewable sources of energy and maximisation of energy generation and conservation (Martínez Castillo, 2004).

the potential of abandoned, disused public green spaces when reclaimed by environmental organisations. They reflect on the dissolution of that project using the metaphor of a dandelion that is being blown, to indicate how the closure of that project inspired the creation of multiple others.

> Blowing a dandelion. A bunch of seeds were scattered which will form lots and lots of dandelions. Each of them had to reinvent themselves and transform or create similar projects (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22).

In fact, many native trees grown in that "ecovillage" community nursery were reallocated to the UTEP's workplace, serving as mother trees from which to harvest seeds (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 25/02/22; Interview with Lucía, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/03/22).

As seen, this issue of 'invention' and 'reinvention' frequently arises among participants in the popular economy. In a context of uncertain access to resources and ongoing economic challenges, participants are constantly required to adapt and reinvent their projects. While this is leading to innovative labour experiences, it also highlights significant limitations to their projects in their capacity to last over time.

There was also a second activist experience happening near the UTEP's workplace, to which some participants established ties. This one called to protect a public green space against its privatisation into a rugby club, privatisation that was promoted and supported by the municipal government. In manifestations against the privatisation of that public space which involved the local community, representatives from the MTE union met members of the *Semillas* NGO for the first time. This meeting sparked the later offer of the opportunity to participate as trainers at the new workplace (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 25/03/22).

The influence of earlier socio-environmental activist experiences within the local urban setting is particularly significant in the Entre Ríos case. Government officials indicate that the Plan of Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food was born as a response to growing local mobilisations against the use of toxic agrochemicals and its impact on people's health. In 2017, after the tragic death of a child who

contracted cancer, local public dissatisfaction towards the use of these kind of substances grew, associated with the increasing rates of this illness in the area. In response to these mobilisations, in 2018, the local government promoted a municipal ordinance which banned the use of the herbicide glyphosate in several parts of the district. In addition, they launched the mentioned Plan, which advocates for the transition to agroecological methods as an alternative to the use of agrotoxics.

It is worth noting that the city was also, during 2005, the nucleus of massive mobilisations against the construction of pulp mills in neighbouring Uruguay due to concerns over the impact on pollution, which interviewees also consider as part of the 'breeding ground' of pro-environmental mobilisation that provides a context of social legitimacy to the Plan.

In light of the ban to glyphosate in 2018, government officials remember farmers manifesting their opposition to the decision, due to its impact on the form of production. Some of them accused the government of not letting them produce. The choice for agroecology was, partly, a response to this accusation, a way of showing an alternative of production, and to move beyond the mere prohibition (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22; Interview with Camila, government official, Entre Ríos, 01/12/22). This is consistent with a more general trend identified in the literature, which notes that in Argentinian municipalities where the application of these substances was legally restricted, it created opportunities for developing alternative non-toxic agricultural methods (Palmisano, 2023).

Participants also seek to expand their networks of support beyond local actors. This explains, in Entre Ríos, the call for the participation of external advisors with recognised academic and activist trajectories. It was the conjunction of local environmental mobilisations and the support from these external advisors which led to the formulation of the Plan. Government officials, then,

> called different people of reference linked to this problem, to collectively think: 'Well, we have this problem. What do you think we can do, to address the issue that people are clearly demonstrating in the streets, to which we are committed, right?'. Because many times people demonstrate, mobilise in the streets, but municipal

> governments are not receptive to them. Here you have that conjunction where you have organised people, mobilised in the streets, with a very concrete, very clear demand, and a municipal government that is sensitive to listening to that demand, right? And that's where the call for participation comes in (Interview with Damián, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 13/07/22).

Additionally, worth mentioning is the support to the creation in 2016 of RENAMA, a network of local communities and municipalities that support agroecology (Ciancaglini, 2021; Pinto, 2020). The municipality involved in the Entre Ríos case study was one of the two first municipal governments to adhere to this network (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22; Interview with Damián, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 13/07/22). After them, nineteen other municipal governments decided to adhere, as well as groups of producers, professionals, and organisations (Palmisano, 2023). They organise meetings to share experiences of alternative practices to agribusiness, and support new members seeking to transition towards agroecological techniques.

Participants from both case studies also recognise their roots in previous experiences in other cities. Alternatives to the so-called 'Green Revolution', the push to introduce the use of agrochemicals and GMOs produced by multinational companies, exist at least since the late 1980s in Argentina. For example, as a milestone of the movement during those years, participants identify the creation of a periurban community garden in public lands in a working-class neighbourhood in the city of Rosario, which later gave rise to the municipal Programme of Urban Agriculture and the creation of several Garden Parks (*Parques Huerta*) that survived throughout the years (Lattuca, 2012; Lattuca et al., 2014)[26]. Participants visited the Garden Parks in Rosario: from Buenos Aires, as part of a training in biodynamic agriculture methods (Interview with Lucía, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/03/22), and from Entre Ríos, to get inspiration for policy formulation (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos,

[26] Another foundational experience for the agroecological movement is the creation in 1988 of a farm in a rural town north of Santa Fe province. It was created by a couple of militants that used to participate in the *Ligas Agrarias* in the 1970s and had to exile from the country during the period of the last military dictatorship in the country (1976-1982) (Ciancaglini, 2021). One of the members of that group participated in the 2022 Conference of the Plan of Healthy, Safe, and Sovereign Food organised by the municipal government in the Entre Ríos case study, giving a talk on plant-based mother tinctures (Participant observation, Entre Ríos, 03/11/22).

18/04/22). The projects I analyse, then, are not isolated, but have connections to bigger socio-environmental networks with collaborative ties.

4.4.1 Divergent visions of participation: entrepreneurs or cooperative?

The role that the NGOs have is significant for the case in Buenos Aires, especially during the initial phase of the productive project. They influenced the development of both a food garden and a native plant nursery, though the latter not being in the original plans of the labour movement.

Before meeting MTE representatives, the NGO *Semillas* already had a plan to create native plant nurseries in order to expand the scale of their actions, but they did not have enough space to do so. Prior to being engaged in the creation of native plant nurseries, their actions had a smaller scale. They were focused on planting trees on sidewalks, on demand from individual neighbours interested in growing a tree there (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 25/03/22). They did not have much knowledge about CTEP's form of participation, but both *Creciendo* and *Semillas* NGO members remember being fascinated by the invitation to participate in the CTEP's workplace due to the possibility that it gave them to produce in a bigger space (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 25/03/22; Interview with Santiago, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 29/06/22). There was a leap in scale, from the form of individual neighbour participation on the sidewalks, to formally becoming an NGO and working as trainers for groups of nursery workers.

This transition brought new challenges, particularly regarding the economic aspect. Working with popular economy workers implied new challenges for them, because the project needs to generate an income to sustain the participants' work (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 16/06/22). That was not a major concern in the past, given the middle-class origins of the NGOs. Collaboration between the groups made them increase the scope of their activist practices, making the project of an agroecological workplace a reality.

However, this collaboration was not without tensions. This point helps to conceptualise the plural dimension of the public as contradictory and challenging, but at the same time, as a relation that makes projects possible. Politics involves the transformation of social realities from establishing collaborative relations between different groups that may not see eye to eye in all aspects.

A contrast can be established between how participation should work from the perspective of the members of the labour union, and the NGOs' vision. Research on participation in Latin America has identified how the ideas that many NGOs hold over it are not necessarily convergent to the ones that social movements promote. For instance, Dagnino (2007) identifies a schism between their two political projects. One, typified by social movements, is based on the distribution and democratisation of power, and the extension of citizens' rights. The other is a neoliberal project supported by NGOs and corporate foundations, who also talk about participation but in a depoliticised and individualistic way. They rely on the private terrain of the moral values of voluntary work and solidarity, but without questioning the causes of social inequality and poverty.

With this study I show a distinct but related controversy. The divergence manifests in the Buenos Aires case as a tension between an entrepreneurship or a cooperative model. On the one hand, the entrepreneurship model advocated by the NGO encourages hierarchical ways of organising the workplace and middle-class romanticised ideas of garden production. This ties with Coraggio's (1994) identification of a "entrepreneurial-modernising" perspective present in NGOs and international organisations, that seeks to convert popular economy initiatives into modern, efficiency-driven, capitalist enterprises. On the other hand, participants in my case study oppose the perspective of the popular economy. Advocated by the UTEP, this perspective emphasises on the working-class component of the initiatives and participants not being employees, but self-determined as a group.

While the labour movements insist on the idea of making popular sectors the protagonists of the initiatives, the NGO vision, according to Julia (a participant of the labour union), tends to focus on the aesthetic dimension of environmental projects and on hierarchical forms of participation. Julia argues that NGO

trainers wanted to involve the workers in supervised and guided forms of participation under their tutelage, with the workers having less decision-making power (Interview with Julia, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/08/22). It is also in this light that I understand the words of one of the NGO trainers, Emiliano, about how challenging it was for them to make the workers value the role of NGO participants as their trainers (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 16/02/22). Workers express their discomfort with this form of participation that constrains their decision-making power and makes them feel less important. It contradicts the ethos of popular economy, which is about not having a boss and being self-directed.

Participants can also perceive the distance between labour union members and NGOs in regard of their social class. Julia explains this by remembering an event. She witnessed how contradictory was that workers that barely make ends meet had to pay attention to trainers talking about SWOT matrixes for entrepreneurs[27], in a complex language associated with marketing techniques. For her, the ideas behind the creation of a SWOT matrix are not corresponding to the cooperative spirit of a popular economy project.

> We are popular economy workers, why do we have to think of ourselves as entrepreneurs? We are not entrepreneurs, because an entrepreneur is an individual, going out to the market. We are a group, we are an organisation. What matters is the relation with our *compañeros*[28] and building something together. A cooperative, not an enterprise (Interview with Julia, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/08/22).

Another contradictory situation is exemplified in the NGO participants' romanticised vision of hard manual labour in the plant nursery and garden, according to Julia. "They talked a lot about energy, about how you need to have good energy for the plant to grow", Julia remembers, "it felt to me like they were putting something magical on it, you know, like they were adding a magical ingredient, which, in this context, doesn't really make sense to me" (Interview with Julia, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/08/22). The call to having a good attitude when engaging with plant care might seem appealing to upper and

[27] SWOT is the acronym of "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats", and is a tool to analyse the position, advantages and disadvantages of an enterprise in the market compared to and against its competitors (Teoli et al., 2023).

[28] In this Argentinian context, the word *compañero*, which has not a direct equivalent in English, refers to fellow workers and members of the movements who share common collective aims.

middle-class participants, especially if it is an activity associated with leisure. Literature on community gardens has shown how many of these experiences are informed by this narrative of pleasure (Aptekar, 2015; Cepic et al., 2020; Hale et al., 2011). However, the same call for displaying a nice energy in an activity carried out by the working class, with the aim of making a living, does not have the same significance. It could be received by workers as unrealistic, and may induce feelings of self-guilt if it happens that not all the plants survive.

However, despite recognising that both groups have different visions, participants understand the need of working together. They need to embrace that plurality in order to make the project possible. Actually existing popular and environmental economic initiatives develop in a given socio-political context, and not in a perfect space of aligned consensus. In the urban area where the workplace is located, a considerable percentage of the population belongs to the upper and middle classes. The existing environmental activist networks were not an exception. The labour union needed to generate resources and get the project off the ground, something that they understood they could not do if isolated, as Lucía reflects:

> It is very difficult to cut yourself off and then go to work or and fight for your rights. I mean, you need to encourage the building of a something integral, and that integral has a lot of nuances, a lot of difficulties. But, well, you are also creating a lot of possibilities, creations that are terrific. Because how else do you learn? If you stay in the neighbourhood, with what happens in the neighbourhood (…) there is no possibility of progressing (Interview with Lucía, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/03/22).

By forging links between environmental activists and popular labour unions, a different kind of environmental project is brought about. It is one that has a socio-economic dimension, where participants are not the usual suspects of environmental struggles but the working-class. It is cooperation, although not fusion or perfect consensus, between socio-environmental activists and labour union movements interested in environmental issues, which makes these initiatives possible. This cooperation in tension forges a plural form of publicness.

4.5 The “flesh and blood” of the state

I have focused in the last two sections on the role that labour unions, on the one hand, and environmental activists and networks, on the other, have in forging the workplaces of both case studies. Within this segment, I concentrate on the involvement that state agencies have in both cases.

Discussing the role of the state is key for theorising the emergent forms of publicness. For much of the 20th century, the idea of the public was associated with the nation-state, understood as an authoritative actor, a referent of common symbolic integration, and a guarantor of citizenship rights (Rabotnikof, 2008). This image of the state entered into crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Literature arguing in favour of participatory forms of governance criticised the hierarchical and centralised model of state planning, highlighting its inefficiency in facilitating the active, broad, and deep political involvement of the population (Fung & Wright, 2001). The idea of the public mutated towards civil society, seen as an autonomous sphere of participation and deliberation (Rabotnikof, 2008).

Beyond state-centred forms of publicness, an alternative is to consider it in a decentred, pluralistic, and participatory way (Cumbers, 2012). In this line, I argue that the notion of public does not need to be seen as a synonym for the state, but include, in a more extensive way, the participation of a plurality of actors. However, this does not mean that the role of the state should be disregarded. There are interlaces and dynamic relationships between the state and the civil society (Cumbers, 2015). They are not to be understood as two mutually exclusive poles for the formulation of the public.

I consider the role that state agencies in different levels, from the municipal to the national, acquire in the production of the workplaces in the two cases. To explain the degree of state influence in the cases, I assert that they can be situated in opposite points of a continuum between top-down and bottom-up politics. While the former indicates a higher concentration of decision-making power in state agencies, contrastingly, in the latter, the movements have more influence. I consider that the concepts of bottom-up and top-down can be more adequately used to understand experiences if imagined in a continuum, rather

than as fixed extremes. As I describe in this thesis, the two case studies have been influenced by both state agencies and movements, so none are pure expressions of a bottom-up or a top-down form of politics. Though, actors are assembled in a different manner.

A condition of possibility for establishing relations with state agencies is that both the UTT and UTEP consider this as a possibility for rights recognition and support for their projects. However, they establish a distinction between participation in the labour union and participation in political parties[29]. This is another element that helps us to consider how the form of publicness in these settings entails collaboration in plurality, but not homogeneity, nor fusion between different groups. Thus, a degree of relative autonomy between them.

The case located in Entre Ríos province can be situated more closely to the top-down extreme of the continuum when compared to the Buenos Aires one. There, the involvement of the municipal government is central to the development of the initiative. The creation of the reserve and *colonia* is part of the overarching food sovereignty Plan implemented by the municipality. Regarding this, some participants mention notions such as ‘political will’ and ‘political decision’ to describe the attitude of the local government in deciding to create the initiative.

> Here there’s a political decision made by the mayor, the mayor says: 'I think it is important to do this' and the municipal cabinet as a whole works in a transversal way, as we say, all together, so that the environmental policies can be developed. The Plan is that, a policy of the mayor who said: 'we are going to go against glyphosate, we are going to create a plan', we created it together, the whole municipal cabinet working together so that there is a food plan for all the local people. But it is a political decision. If the mayor wasn’t convinced, it

[29] Participants believe that political affinities to certain parties or governments should not prevent them from demanding workers’ rights and public policies for the sector, and being sensitive to the difficulties experienced at the local scale (Interview with Yamila, worker, Buenos Aires, 04/04/22; Interview with Luciano, worker, Buenos Aires, 15/07/22). Some participants feel drawn to engaging with political parties and working in governmental areas. Others feel more distant to that, and prefer to focus solely on their participation within the initiative or within the union (Interview with Eliana, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/04/22; Interview with Mateo, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/02/22). These labour movements engage with the state but at the same time maintain an organisational distance. They do not seek to merge with political parties.

> couldn't have been developed (Interview with Bárbara, government official, 18/04/22).

Participants class the municipal government political orientation as an exception to the rule. They consider that the city was a pioneer that serves as inspiration to other cities that may want to emulate these actions, but have not yet done so (Interview with Damián, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 13/07/22; Interview with Felipe, governmental officer, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22). In this view, the Plan is described as a "spearhead" in a country where "the agrarian issue is taboo" (Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 07/05/22), where it is not so easy to oppose the interests of the agribusiness sector. For the UTT, the local government orientation represented a context of possibility to move forward with their tactic of signing agreements with municipal governments to set up *colonias* for agroecological production (Interview with Rocío, worker, 20/09/21).

But what has, in this logic, made the mayor take the decision? I mentioned in Section 4.4 how the Plan emerged as a response to a context of environmental mobilisation against the use of agrotoxics, as well as a way of showing an alternative to the prohibition of these substances. Environmental advocacy was first an object of collective action of local movements that introduced the problem as an issue of public debate. However, while the local environmental mobilisation is relevant to understand the emergence of the Plan, their demand was for health but not directly and specifically for the policy, which was drafted with the help of the external advisors. Thus, while it did not emerge out of thin air, the specific proposal was made from local governmental institutions to the citizenship and not the other way around.

With this in mind, considering that the workplace (reserve and *colonia*) is one of the initiatives included in the Plan, the local government has considerable weight in deciding how it functions. This can also be seen in two facts. First, there are workers employed directly by them to run the space. Second, UTT workers were invited to participate by the municipal government. All in all, not considering the context of mobilisation or the role of the UTT, gives an incomplete picture of the case, thus a degree of influence from bottom-up politics is also present in the Entre Ríos case.

Participants do not portrait the state as having fixed traits, as if it could not change over time. It is not necessarily an obstacle for the movements' projects, sometimes it can act as an ally. They observe that the state is subject to change through time, depending on the power of the people to influence these transformations. For them, it is a legitimate tactic to engage with the state and even be part of it in order to transform reality. In the words of a participant, the "meaning of the state" can change "through the struggle of peoples (*pueblos*) and individuals", "depends on us", "depends on what people do", it can "protect the oppressor" or "guarantee human rights" (Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 23/02/22). This chimes with Cumbers (2015)'s reflections on the need to recognise the diversity of relationships between state and society across geographies and conjunctures, reflecting contexts of struggle that can event turn the state into a space of battles. The state is not an isolated space from the rest of the society. As Angel (2017) argues, the state is constituted through historical and geographical processes and relations, and it is not a detached entity.

In this line, participants' view of this particular state, in this given conjuncture, is reminiscent of Bohoslavsky and Soprano (2010)'s theorisations on the "state with a human face" in Argentina. The state is not a univocal space, but a polyphonic arena, where people act and interact. To see the "human face" of the state is to discover who these people are, who are these concrete actors that inhabit it, and which activities they have. Participants in Entre Ríos remark on the Plan not as something that comes from the state as an impersonal institution. Instead, it is formed by real people, "flesh and blood people" that they trust, in Omar's words. These people, in the given historical conjuncture, found in state institutions a possibility to propose an alternative to the prevalent form of agricultural production. The state then becomes a "fertile ground to move forward" with the project (Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 23/02/22). It is in this particular group of people that participants such as Omar decide to trust, and not in an ahistorical and abstract idea of the state devoid of any context. These participants within the state have their own agency, plan and implement policies for agroecology and food sovereignty despite the existence of oppositions.

This case study can be seen as an example of an actually existing municipalist approach to politics. Literature on new municipalism has identified proximity as the key logic that animates this approach to doing politics (Roth et al., 2023). This principle of proximity claims that the most legitimate politician is the one who comes "close" to the everyday reality of the "ordinary people", guided by an emphatic and attentive listening attitude (Annunziata, 2011). In this vein, government officials in the studied case say they aim to create a participatory government, an "open-door municipality" (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22) where governmental institutions can "listen" to people and create links based on two-way interactions and not top-down communication. In their view, then, people would feel that policies are their own and "not something that is the decision of a municipal government that is alien to them" (Interview with Alberto, government official, Entre Ríos, 30/11/22). That is because, in the end, "what makes changes sustainable over time", "lasting", "profound" and "real", "is that the people take ownership of them" (Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 23/02/22) in contrast to decisions that are imposed from above. They propose a criticism of state-centrist forms of doing politics, which also explains the pluralistic form of publicness that the initiative crystallises. While I position this case as closer to the top-down point in the continuum in comparison with the Buenos Aires one, it is important to also observe how participants in Entre Ríos recognise the relevance of bottom-up influences and of having an open and listening attitude from the government.

This local government also demonstrates a municipalist approach in the relevance they give to local autonomy, in contrast to the supra levels of government. They defend the autonomy of the municipality to dictate local public policies to protect the environment, under the basis that they are the level of government that has more proximity to the people.

> Because of their proximity to the population they serve, (…) they allow us to question them directly. Local governments are much more accountable, concretely, because you meet the mayor in the street, in the neighbourhood, in the supermarket. When you go up to a provincial or national level of government, the interests are much more powerful, they are more intertwined, the people in charge are much less accessible, so for us it is key that, and as the movement for food sovereignty and the movement for agroecology come from the

> bottom up, the first political area to be challenged is the local government, so the area where we have made the most progress is precisely at the local government level (Interview with Damián, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 13/07/22).

For Damián, the proximity of the local government facilitates the capacity of socio-environmental movements to influence decisions. Again, here it can be seen how the state is understood by them, in this context, as a porous institution, opened up to the demands of the agroecological movement.

Initially, the principle of proximity can be seen as too broad and indecisive, as there are lots of conflictive demands that people can express to the government to 'listen' closely. Many governments can say that they are disposed to 'listen' to the demands of the population. But which demands are those? In this case, there is a choice to be attentive to socio-environmental demands, which collide with the position of other inhabitants of the city that support the use of agrochemicals in food production. The proximity principle is combined with a political position in favour of the agroecological and food sovereignty approach.

The capacity to forge good relations between the state and society represents an aspiration not only for movements to access resources, but also for governmental institutions. I interpret this idea of the 'open-door municipality' and the governmental aim to make society participate as their proposed solution for the need to build support for the agroecological Plan. This happens in a context of lack of support from powerful political and economic actors that advocate in favour of the agribusiness model, as well of from other governmental scales such as the provincial. In fact, mostly, the space of the reserve and *colonia* is funded by the local government. It does not get any financial support from the provincial government. Between 2015-2023, both the governor of the province and the mayor of the municipality were part of Peronist alliances. However, this does not mean that they agree on these agroecological policies, which shows the differences and diversities existing within Peronism as a political movement. Regarding the national government[30], the municipality has

[30] It was only after 2019 when the national government administration changed the party coalition in charge that the municipality was able to get some financial support for the *colonia*. In fact, former President Macri (2015-2019) was critical of the proposals to limit the use of agrotoxics in the region (Interview with Damián, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 13/07/22).

been able to get some funding to the *colonia*, though the reserve part is not benefited by those funds (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22; Interview with Nacho, worker, Entre Ríos, 16/12/22).

This also indicates that being a Peronist government is not an indicator that explains the support for agroecological and food sovereignty policies. This case study demonstrates that municipal governments can exercise a degree of relative autonomy in implementing policies that do not necessarily align with the preferences of provincial or national governments, even when those elected governments can recognise themselves as Peronists. This highlights a key aspect of municipalist politics, which challenges the notion that municipalities merely replicate policies from higher levels of government (Avritzer, 2010; Goldfrank & Schrank, 2009), and instead can introduce unique and distinctive initiatives.

Additionally, although land ownership laws cannot be regulated by the municipal government due to lack of legal competencies, setting the reserve and *colonia* in a public space is a way for the municipal government to indirectly introduce the discussion on land ownership on the public agenda. They see it as a way to influence how other agricultural producers work in the region and why these spaces should be considered of public utility (Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 07/05/22).

While the involvement of the municipal government is crucial for understanding the participatory setting in the Entre Ríos case, the same cannot be said for the Buenos Aires one. Thus, a different plural mosaic of publicness can be found there. The municipality's approach can better be understood by its omission or even opposition to UTEP's presence and management of the space. Participants consider that the local government has not been totally receptive to generate cooperative links to participants. They also observe that the local government regards the area where the workplace is located with disdain, as a "far away" location to the centre of the municipality (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 16/02/22) which has a privileged economic position in comparison. This is interpreted by participants as part of the local government and upper and middle classes' neglect of working-class neighbourhoods, and a stigmatising perception towards beneficiaries of conditional cash transfer programmes and participants of the labour union (Interview with Yamila, worker, Buenos Aires,

04/04/22). Thus, explanations for the lack of support are based on a class factor. Compared to the Entre Ríos case, the local government here shows another side of the state. It is not the "flesh and blood" people described by Omar, who show their proximity towards the agroecological workers and supporters.

In reference to the environmental cause, some participants interpret that the municipal government policies disregard the relevance of taking care of native trees, and prefers planting exotic species in public spaces such as parks and squares (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22). However, not everyone agrees to this interpretation. Others think that the municipality is committed to regeneration by supporting nature reserves (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22). Thus, this is not as clear as with the case of Entre Ríos, where the local government is described as a leading case of promotion of agroecological and food sovereignty policies.

In addition, participants remark that the municipal government tends to support initiatives that privatise green public spaces. Contrastingly, in Entre Ríos, it was the government who recovered the green space for building the *colonia* and nature reserve, after having been concessioned to a private school. In Buenos Aires, participants illustrate this governmental attitude by remembering the local government record of promoting the privatisation of a nature reserve area to a rugby club, which local environmental activists opposed, as referred to in Section 4.4. This makes participants afraid that they might support the privatisation of the workplace in the future in benefit of real estate agents (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22) and jeopardise the popular economy and agroecological initiative.

Instead, most of the resources such as tools and supplies for setting up the workplace come from national government programmes via the Social Development Ministry, such as a Complementary Social Salary[31] for workers

[31] The Complementary Social Salary (*Salario Social Complementario*) is an indirect remuneration that workers in the popular economy receive for their work, paid by state programmes. It is one of the objectives of the labour union's struggle (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014). Because popular economy workers cannot negotiate their wage with employers, they have sought the intervention of the state by advocating for this social salary to help them maintain a livelihood above the poverty line (Felder & Patroni, 2018). The idea of salary intends to

(Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 25/02/22). This has happened both during the presidential terms of Mauricio Macri (2015 – 2019) and Alberto Fernández (2019 –2023) despite their different political orientations[32]. However, state institutions do not manage the workplace directly, as happens in the Entre Ríos case. Workers in the Buenos Aires space self-manage the workplace. It was a responsibility of the labour unions to develop the workplace, create networks with further actors, and set up the training workshops with the members of the NGOs (Interview with Luciano, worker, Buenos Aires, 28/03/22). For that reason, this case is situated closer to the bottom-up extreme of the continuum. Workers have greater autonomy to make decisions regarding their workplace management.

In this light, the perception that Buenos Aires' participants have with respect to the state tended to be less celebratory and more distant. While they actively engage with institutions to get support for their projects and getting rights recognition, they tend to remark on the importance of their autonomy to decide how to conduct the workplace. One of the volunteers even emphasises that the initiative emerges out of the will of participants that decide to create "alternatives" that "aren't the institutional ones, from the state". She believes that "not everything depends on institutions". For her, what matters most is the "human" dimension of sharing similar "values" (Interview with Andrea, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 15/07/22). This resembles, in a different point of the continuum, the idea of the initiative in Entre Ríos depending on the actions of "flesh and blood people" that participants can trust (Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 23/02/22). In one case, the "flesh and blood people" who are deemed trustworthy can occupy positions in the local state, and help propagate the agroecological cause. In another case, these people with a "human" dimension can be found in the grassroots, but be equally committed to the cause.

resignify the activity that participants do as labour, against the burden of prejudice that is placed on this sector. It seeks to modify the logic of income transfer, from a welfare profile to the recognition of the subjects of the popular economy as workers (Rach, 2021). It was recognised in 2016 by a Social Emergency Law (Felder & Patroni, 2018).

[32] The most known programmes for the popular economy sectors during these years were *Hacemos Futuro* first and then *Potenciar Trabajo*. See Footnote 16 for further references.

The critique they formulate to how the state institutions sometimes act makes sense in their experience. They have observed how state institutions tend to be behind the curve, characterised by inaction or even punishing activists who decide to intervene, despite the urgency of the crisis. Thus, they position themselves as activists that, in the face of inaction or damage produced by the state, choose to take action in the public space, instead of passively waiting for things to change. "We don't have to be constantly waiting for the state to intervene", “we have the power in our hands" (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 25/03/22). This logic can be seen in the decision to transform the public space in a functioning workplace, despite what they see as years of neglect and oblivion from official institutions, who allowed the site to deteriorate and be vandalised.

Securing funding from national programmes is essential for the initiative. However, it does not fully explain how the workplace was established and developed. As the state withdrew from its responsibilities, grassroots movements emerged to reclaim and rebuild publicness.

By comparing the two cases it can be seen how local governments can behave in opposite directions. This gives rise to different interpretations of its role, in one case, more inclined to believe in their transformative power, and in the other, generating disaffection. These findings provide support for a situated, contextual approach to the study of the role that the local state can have with regard to alternative economic initiatives. It also shows how publicness is composed by different mosaics, depending on which case we focus our view.

4.6 Conclusions

This chapter presents the mosaic of participants that take part in both initiatives, and distinguishes their diverse modes and approaches towards participation. This mosaic provides the basis for arguing how publicness is defined by its plurality in the cases under study. Plural publicness is formed by diverse participants in each socio-political local context: from workers to government officials, from volunteers to NGO trainers and advisors. It depends on the active engagement of labour and environmental movements, and some degree of support of state institutions.

I also referred to how a plural form of publicness does not presuppose homogeneity of positions and total conformity. Rather, plural participation is crisscrossed by differences and tensions between positions. While participants decision to cooperate is based on their shared interest towards environmental issues and particularly the support to the agroecological approach, this does not mean that they always agree on the forms that participation may take. This tension is exemplified in the chapter with the conflicting visions between labour union workers and NGO trainers in Buenos Aires. While the former support a cooperative, popular economy approach to participation, when the organised workers self-determine how to run the workplace, the latter have a middle-class orientation, more inclined to focus on the aesthetics of the place and an entrepreneurship approach for managing the activities.

Finally, while these experiences show a non state-centric form of publicness, it is not a form of public linked exclusively to the civil society. Participants do not claim total autonomy from the state, but a form of autonomy that nevertheless engage with the state. They understand that the state can be a place for disputing rights and getting support. However, as the situated analysis shows, the state does not show the same level of support and presence in the two case studies. In one of them I identify a municipalist approach, where the local government fulfils an active role in the creation of the agroecological *colonia* and nature reserve as part of an encompassing food sovereignty programme, and defends the autonomy to formulate socio-environmental policies despite the lack of assistance of provincial and national levels of government. In the other, participants demonstrate a grassroots approach to developing the agroecological workplace by demanding resources from other levels of government but managing the space on their own.

In the next chapter, I describe how this pluralistic publicness takes its concrete form with a labour-oriented perspective that guides the initiative. After describing the different mosaics that compose it, it is time to focus on the labour dimension of the everyday life in the agroecological settings.

Chapter 5 A labour-oriented publicness: the workers' subjectivity in the centre

5.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the configuration of publicness in relation to labour practices. I argue that in both case studies, labour emerges as a key dimension to define the form of participation at stake. There, actors participate by creating and developing a workplace in a public space. The main form of subjectivity present in these settings is associated to a productive role, and the notions of worker and producer have an unquestionable centrality. This serves as a continuation of the previous chapter, where I described how these participatory settings are formed by relationships established between different groups of actors, giving publicness a plural character. Here, I focus on the group of participants that define their subjectivity as workers and producers.

Drawing from Kopper and Richmond's (2024) conceptualisation of subjectivity at Latin America's urban peripheries, I understand this notion as a way of "becoming" for actors. Being a worker is a way of exercising agency and participating in their search for living a life that is deemed worthy of living.

Subjectivities are shaped by historical and cultural contexts (Medina-Zárate & Uchôa de Oliveira, 2019), varying across different geographies. The presence of peasants as political subjects and movements of the peasantry are a key component in several countries in Latin America (Vergara-Camus & Kay, 2017). This category has also been identified as a key form of subjectification on international networks in support of agroecology (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010). However, in the Argentinian cases under study, this category holds less weight, and the notions of worker and producer are more prominent. In fact, literature on the Argentinian labour movement has shown how it has seen a resurgence in the 21st century, of the formal working sector but also beyond (Atzeni & Grigera, 2019; Elbert, 2017; Natalucci & Mate, 2023). My thesis indicates the need for the literature on agroecological movements to be open to other forms of subjectification that have not been explored yet, as using the category of peasant would not be precise in the socio-political context that I research.

The chapter is structured into three main sections. Section 5.2 asserts that participation in both initiatives is understood as a form of getting a proper job and being able to earn an income to support their lives. For this reason, I observe how making a living, solving needs, and having an adequate remuneration, becomes a trigger for participating and committing to building these workplaces. Section 5.3 describes one of the main qualities valued by participants to act in these settings: cultivating knowledge. Showing willingness to learn and sharing knowledge emerges as the criterion to define a valuable form of participation for them. Thirdly, Section 5.4 explains how the configuration of the public setting is tied to a principle of equality between workers, valuing a collaborative form of work among peers and not having a boss. This is also considered by participants as a way of achieving freedom and self-determination, in contrast to dependent forms of working under an employer.

Each section also considers debates that arise in practice for the actors. First, while participants conceive economic remuneration as a legitimate aspiration, they also observe that it cannot be on an individual basis or unrestricted. It needs to be framed in a public and collective sense, to be consistent with the environmental and social values that orient the projects. Second, knowledge acquisition is dependent on the active disposition of participants beyond the time-consuming manual workload they already have. But this can collide with the right to enjoy free time that participants also deem valuable. Third, while equality is an operating principle of the initiatives, this does not imply a romanticisation of horizontality. Working among peers is not opposed to the existence of organisational hierarchies, as well as setting up divisions of labour and task specialisation.

5.2 Participation as a way of making a living

In this section, I turn my attention to the importance that workers from both cases emphasise to be able to generate their income from their work in the initiatives. In contrast to cases in the United Kingdom and North America, Ferguson (2018) has shown for the case of Bolivia that the emphasis on the non-profit orientation of the social economy is not present there. My research agrees with this. Moreover, participants in my research aim to make a living from their

own labour as agroecological producers, to make it an economically fruitful activity. Thus, their participation to build and develop the workplaces is understood as a form of getting a proper job to earn the necessary income to support their lives. In turn, being motivated to work in order to make a living is integrated in these initiatives to having a socio-environmental commitment. Both kinds of aims constitute motivations to get involved in the creation and growth of the workplaces.

Positioning workers as the main subjects diverges from previous scholarship on urban growing and community gardening. Research has found out that the most common operating groups in community gardens tend to be non-profit organisations, schools, faith based organisations, hospitals, prisons, etc. (Guitart et al., 2012). Numerous cases evidenced by the literature, particularly located in Europe and North America, basically depend on voluntary labour for their survival (Biewener, 2016; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; Rosol, 2012; St Clair et al., 2020; Traill, 2023). But, as discussed in Chapter 4, the volunteer subjectivity is different to that of the worker. Volunteers regard their participation as a hobby for their free time, and have the privilege of "free time and resources to dedicate their efforts to a cause without payment" (St Clair et al., 2020, p. 357). This has been problematised by the literature, due to the implications for inclusiveness. Structural issues of economic deprivation and joblessness limit access to participation in gardening initiatives (Pitt, 2014). Moreover, volunteer-led spaces can become a "monoculture" of predominantly white and middle-class people with similar backgrounds (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011, p. 2). Dependence on unpaid work can also lead to situations of exploitation and exclusion of low-income people, who would struggle to "offer significant amounts of time or money as volunteers" (Biewener, 2016, p. 50). Having workers as the main subject of urban agriculture initiatives constitutes an alternative to these volunteer-led experiences.

However, working-class participants in community gardens who are beneficiaries of welfare governmental programmes are sometimes disregarded in their capacity of agency. They have been seen as objects of control and discipline of neoliberal governance (Rosol, 2012, p. 250). I would like to propose an

alternative view, by understanding their motivations and resituating them at the centre of these initiatives.

The worker as a subject has neither been favourably viewed in Bookchin's municipalist theory. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the workers' subjectivity has been seen as "concerned primarily with their own particularistic interests" (Bookchin, 2005, p. 20), but not the general interest of the society. In this line, Bookchin argues that workers need to act within the popular assemblies not in their identity as workers, but as citizens. This is related to a distinction between the political and the economical, a classic one in political theory debates, most notably in Arendt's writings (1958). This separation seems inadequate to describe the actual experiences that I study. According to Arendt, the *oikos*, the activities "related to the maintenance of life" (1958, p. 28), is part of an actor's private life, "a darker ground which must remain hidden" (1958, p. 71). This is opposed for her to the *polis*, the realm of people being together in public, "related to a common world" (1958, p. 28). Public action, for her, means to be free of one's own necessities, in order to enter the world in common, much like the gardens' volunteers who do not need a monetary retribution. This has, then, the effect of excluding workers of the public realm.

The opposition between the *oikos* and the *polis* can also be found in analysis of popular politics and movements in Argentina. Quirós (2008) indicates that there is a detrimental tendency in the literature to classify the reasons to participate in a popular movement. Some reasons are deemed as more valid and morally good, and others are discredited. In the first group, that we can identify with the *polis*, there would be reasons such as being altruistic and seeking the common good, a change of the capitalist system, or a democratisation of political institutions. Satisfying needs and obtaining economic resources would appear as an invalid motive of participation in the public sphere. But that absolute opposition is of no use to make sense of actual experiences.

Uncritically reproducing this dichotomy leaves out fundamental aspects of participants' experiences and understandings. Quirós and Vommaro (2011) propose an alternative out of this dichotomy: trusting the reflexive capacity of participants to define what is valid or invalid in their worlds. Building on this insight, I propose to understand how publicness is constructed in their own

accounts, without evaluating their practices according to preconceived statements of what publicness should be. Wanting to generate an income and being economically sound is not to be understood as a second-best motivation, but as valid as any to understand why they get involved.

Making use of more affordable materials to produce constitutes a drive for transitioning to agroecological methods. That is, it is not only for environmental justice, but also for making their production more financially sustainable. In Entre Ríos, Mateo comments that he and his family felt attracted to agroecology as a way to better utilise the resources they already had in the farm, instead of buying "conventional" agriculture inputs (the ones promoted by the agribusiness model) and incurring a debt to cover the costs of production (Interview with Mateo, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22).

'Conventional' inputs are very expensive, and workers find it difficult to cover its costs. "All these agrochemicals or hybrid seeds are too expensive, they are quoted in reference to the dollar and that is also a problem", explains Rocío. In contrast, by learning agroecological techniques, they can "make natural fertilisers, pest and disease controllers, with ingredients that you can produce or get in the farm and are cheap as well, and without any toxic" (Interview with Rocío, worker, 08/02/22). The attraction that agroecology has in terms of its economic potential is also noted in the literature, which indicates that it can produce higher incomes for farmers (van der Ploeg et al., 2019). Particularly in Argentina, studies have found out that agroecology has lower production costs and more returns in comparison (Cerdá et al., 2014; Lucero, 2022). While that analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that supporters of the agroecological model are mentioning the economic factor as a motivation for their participation. This first factor of attraction can lead participants to become more interested in the broader implications of agroecology, such as caring for the environment and the health dangers of 'conventional' production.

The relevance given by participants to earning an income from their labour was a factor that discouraged the participation of some workers in the area of a native plant nursery in Buenos Aires, at the beginning of the project. This group estimated that the production of trees was something that would not let them generate earnings in the short time, as trees can take years to properly grow

(Interview with Alejandro, worker, Buenos Aires, 01/04/22). It was a project that was more attractive to the *Semillas* NGO, who proposed it. In fact, nursery participants recognise as a milestone the moment where they began to generate incomes from the plant sales (Interview with Gabriela, worker, Buenos Aires, 02/03/22), something that was not possible at first. Less workers were interested at first in taking part in the plant nursery, in contrast to the food garden, which at least could provide some vegetables for their own consumption.

5.2.1 Setting up a "fair price"

Participants expect their products to be commercially attractive. But they cannot directly compete with 'conventional' products that are not made using agroecological methods. Andrés, in Entre Ríos, observes that if they try to sell their agroecological products to 'conventional' greengrocers, they receive a minimal payment, as if the UTT producers were also selling agrochemically produced food. This is not deemed as a fair compensation, and Andrés mentions that these minimal prices offered by greengrocers do not even cover their costs (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22). This point made by Andrés about the infeasibility of selling their goods to greengrocers, being forced to adapt to the low wholesale prices of 'conventional' fruits and vegetables, can be connected to evidence on the unequal terms of competition of popular economy initiatives with the established capitalist sector in regards to their asymmetry of resources (Chena, 2018; Mazzeo & Stratta, 2021; Roig, 2017).

Instead, participants wish for their production to be valued for its specific qualities: being "artisanal" and "unique". Agroecological production is not standardised, processes cannot be exactly replicated, and vegetables taste different, are "less artificial". Andrés finds it offensive that greengrocers try to buy their vegetables at the lower price set by the Central Market[33], considering that their products are of a much better quality. He describes them as "fresh vegetables" from nearby, "without agrochemicals", not "dull and bruised" as

[33] The Central Market, located in Buenos Aires, is a large wholesale and distribution centre for fresh food products that serves as a point of reference for setting up prices.

the ones that come from afar (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

This search for a 'fair price' led to an effort by the UTT workers to set up a commercial outlet where they could commercialise their products directly, with no intermediaries in between. Now, the workers, along with other city co-operatives and the local government, run a local marketplace, the Municipal Market. There, they organise stalls where they sell vegetables produced at the *colonia*, as well as further goods such as yerba mate, pasta, and jams made by UTT producers in other Argentinian regions[34]. By selling directly to customers, they hope they can find a 'fair price' to all, ideally helping both the producer and the consumer, and reducing the price added by third-party actors in the supply chain.

In addition, setting at a 'fair price' is also an indicator, for participants, of a sense of justice for the popular economy sectors. They aim to subvert the "throwaway culture", by which they mean the extended perception in capitalist societies that manual workers can be "discarded", and that goods that require intensive physical labour are not worthy (Interview with Alejandro, worker, Buenos Aires, 01/04/22).

Participants' claims over the better quality of their products and their right to sell these at a 'fair price' can be understood as part of a broader contemporary phenomenon that Morgan (2010, 2015), Morgan et al. (2009), Morley and Morgan (2021) denominate the "moral economy of food". This is a set of narratives that charges products with political and ethical meanings, transforming the act of selling and buying from a seemingly depoliticised and private act, to a practice guided by concerns about how the food has been produced. Thus, the choice to buy an agroecological product as opposed to a 'conventional' one is presented as a political decision to help manual workers from being discarded by capitalism, buy fresh, unique, and artisanal items, contribute to the local economy, help

[34] Lacking a marketplace of this kind in the past was one of the sparks that made several local producers to autonomously set up a popular fair at one of the city squares, the *Plaza Urquiza*, in 2019. Andrés remembers having trouble with local authorities then, as the fair was not authorised to operate. This direct action helped to visualise the issue of commercialisation as a pressing one for local producers, which later resulted in the formal setting of the *Municipal Market* (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

the environment, and prevent agrochemicals from affecting both the producer and the consumer's health. The idea of quality is disputed by producers, and it is the basis to argue in favour of a 'fair price'.

The Municipal Market in Entre Ríos is an example of agroecological producers politicising the act of consumption. The market is seen as a space for generating conversations between producers and city residents about the benefits of agroecological products, the right to know its provenance, and how the goods have been produced. In other words, they help bring visibility to the production process, as opposed to corporate market practices that create seemingly "placeless foodscapes" (Morgan et al., 2009). Andrés explains that the neighbours that come to the Municipal Market like

> to know how it is produced, where it is produced, where it comes from. If possible, what I do is let them try and taste. First thing I did here when I started with agroecological fruit was (…) to prepare a tray for people to try flavours. They tasted bananas from Salta, great *compañeros* from Salta, agroecological bananas… (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

The Market is then created as a space of socialisation, consumer education, a demonstration of the quality of the products, and a politicised foodscape in opposition to the apparently "placeless" ones.

In Buenos Aires, the search for a fair remuneration for their products is found in their aim to get affluent clients. The NGO *Semillas* advised the workers that native plants have a high commercial value because they are demanded by wealthy people. They considered it was

> a context and moment where landscaping and design were beginning to lean heavily towards the valorisation of the native, and there was a movement of academic landscapers who began to see the native (…). There we saw a huge value, when landscaping in a medium and high socioeconomic stratum began to be economically attractive (Interview with Emiliano, NGO trainer, Buenos Aires, 16/06/22).

Participants also show they are proud to take part in a special biodynamic agriculture certification. They believe that once they obtain that accreditation, they will be able to open more commercial doors for their products. Due to their limitation in terms of resources, they were unable to pay for the high-priced

credentials that an international organisation sells[35]. For that reason, they organised an alternative participatory certification system among different biodynamic groups of producers in the Buenos Aires region (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 25/08/22). The implementation of participatory certification systems is a usual practice between local agroecological producers in different parts of the world. Originally created in Brazil, these systems are based on cooperative networks of mutual knowledge, where farmers evaluate their peers. It is considered more adequate for small and local groups than the costly credentials (Altieri et al., 2012; Chaparro-Africano & Naranjo, 2020; Chaparro-Africano & Páramo, 2022; Parreira Brito et al., 2024).

These strategies devised by participants show how popular economy initiatives do not exist in a vacuum, isolated from the rest of the economy. They have connecting rods to the conventional capitalist sector (Mazzeo & Stratta, 2021). Participants actively create spaces for the preservation of their alternative projects in the existing unequal capitalist system, finding possible cracks and potential openings to sell their products with a 'fair price'. This is a challenging endeavour, with no guarantee of success.

5.2.2 Limiting "excessive consumption"

Thus far, I have shown how aiming to make a proper living and earning an adequate income through working in the initiatives is a horizon that guides participants. But, at the same time, popular economy initiatives are not oriented by the principle of profit maximisation (Bauwens & Lemaître, 2014), and the cases I study are not an exception. How can these two principles be reconciled? It is up for debate the scope and limitations of the expectation of receiving an economic remuneration.

[35] Biodynamic agriculture is an alternative form of agriculture based on methods proposed by philosopher Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s, which is said to enhance soil quality and biodiversity. Currently, the brand Demeter has institutionalised an international certification for farms, checking their compliance to specific rules of this technique (Santoni et al., 2022). As reported in the literature, the implementation of this kind of third-party certifications brings about many issues for producers. These include the imposition of general guidelines which may not be appropriate for different contexts, and even inhibit diverse agricultural approaches; the high costs for farmers to adequate to these rules and pay a third-party company for assessment; and the fact that these guidelines seem more adequate for export agriculture instead of local and regional production (Altieri et al., 2012; Parreira Brito et al., 2024).

I propose to address this debate by considering the way that participants expressed this, in the case located in the Entre Ríos province, with regard to the legitimacy or illegitimacy of wishing to buy an expensive pickup truck with their earnings. This wish, according to one of the participants, is a valid motivation for participation, and enables a commitment to the initiatives. However, another participant suggests that consuming excessively is negative and incoherent with the socio-environmental values of the project.

The first of these participants is Alberto, one of the municipal government officers. He comments in his interview that he believes that producers should not feel ashamed for wanting to buy a Toyota Hilux, which is deemed in Argentina as a symbol of status.

> We want them to do well, if they change their car, own a Hilux, they don't have to be ashamed, it would be an achievement for them, because it is a working tool and for them to progress, and wanting their children to continue with the activity. That's why in the issue of prices, to say it also has to be super cheap, no, it has to be a fair price that also works for the producer (Interview with Alberto, municipal officer, Entre Ríos, 30/11/22).

He clarifies that the price charged to consumers must be fair, in order to help the producer have a good quality of life. With that, he makes a point in favour of the democratisation of access to these goods for the working-class. They should not be working for their mere survival, but also for their well-being.

I observed that UTT workers in the *colonia* own a very old truck that needs constant repairing. They use it for transporting their goods from the workplace to the market. With a modern truck, they could be more efficient.

But Nacho, who works as the park ranger, believes that these Hilux trucks are symbols of unrestrained consumption:

> The biggest problem we have is the economic issue, money, the excessive consumption of everything is something that… I don't know how we are going to stop it. This is surely one of the ways, but it is a fight that is very complex, because we are used to consuming everything, and more and more, more and more, from cell phones to vehicles, pickup trucks, and everyone in the countryside has a huge pickup truck (Interview with Nacho, worker, Entre Ríos, 16/12/22).

He shows the worrisome dimension of this systemic "excessive consumption" in terms of its environmental effects:

> Everything we do, everything, everything, absolutely everything we consume comes from nature, from iron, gold, all the minerals. So, if you allow people to have what they want and as many buildings as they want, the cement comes from the mountain, a mountain that you remove from one place and put in another place, that uses sand that comes from here, from the river coast. Later, we talk about it having a recovery rate that is impossible because these are non-renewable resources. So, starting from there, there is not much more to say, we know that resources are running out and that we have to look for an alternative. They know that, everyone knows that, the issue is how much responsibility we take (Interview with Nacho, worker, Entre Ríos, 16/12/22).

Thus, in this light, unrestrained consumption is contrary to the environmental aims of the project. Following this idea, participating also implies questioning the individualistic logic of aspiring to consume "more and more", without thinking about the environmental implications for the planet. For that reason, the wish for an economic compensation needs to be limited, framed in view of the needs of the broader public and not as a private matter.

In the popular economy literature, it is common to define it as encompassing practices of subsistence, aiming for the reproduction of life, and consider these workers' lives as experiences of precarity and dispossession (Fernández Álvarez, 2016, 2019, 2020; Pacífico et al., 2022). While I agree that it is important to highlight the unequal and fragile position of popular economy initiatives, overusing these categories may lead to an imprecision, which would be understanding these experiences as merely aspiring to subsist, but unable to project beyond that. Alberto and Nacho's points show that this is not the case. The expectations projected by participants are not just about surviving in precarious conditions. They aim for broader economic expectations, within a broader environmental aim in view of the general well-being.

5.3 Sharing knowledge and learning

In this section, I turn my attention to a second aspect to conceptualise the form that labour acquires as a principle of participation: knowledge as a valued quality for acting in public.

Palumbo's (2018) research on popular social movements in Argentina has identified how these operate as pedagogical spaces where participants acquire new knowledge and skills. She focuses on how participants learn "how to speak" as activists in the political arena: in local political spaces, in negotiations with government officials, in debates with journalists, in their community, and in deliberative assemblies within the movements. This author uses the term capital to define this skill. Capitals can be thought of as specific qualities and skills that participants may hold, which make actions efficient in the social field where they develop their activities (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In this section, I would like to focus on a different set of knowledge and learnings as a way of 'becoming' for the participants of the initiatives, which defines their subjectivity as workers. The kind of knowledge that emerges as a recurring theme in my interviews is the know-how of agroecology in the farm, in the garden, and in the plant nursery. Success in producing these workplaces is highly dependent on this knowledge, which they acquire by a willingness to learn from peers or trainers, as well as by having prior experience. Having knowledge and skills in areas such as agroecological methods, gardening, biology, and environmental sciences, is considered of value for participation.

Some participants value the possibility of having gotten a job that is complementary to their studies and life values. Having the possibility of working in these projects is for them a way of putting into practice such learning, expanding that knowledge, and also helping other workers. However, not all participants have previous work or study experience in fields related to agriculture and biology. I show in the following subsections the relevance that participants give to both the willingness to share knowledge, which is expressed in the idea of being an "open encyclopedia", as well as to gaining new skills and knowledge if they did not have the possibility to learn in the past. Both of these dispositions constitute the workers' subjectivity.

5.3.1 Being an "open encyclopedia"

Ezequiel is a young worker in Buenos Aires who studies Biodiversity. He notes that his university programme focuses mainly on a theoretical approach to the topic and feels that he needs to gain practical experience. He believes he can

achieve this by getting involved in the initiative and tutoring fellow workers with less experience (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22). I have noticed during my participant observations the prominent role that Ezequiel takes during the daily work sessions in guiding the other plant nursery workers, despite his young age. Other workers request his advice before proceeding with different tasks in the plant nursery. For example, they can be unsure if it is time or not to transplant certain group of plants from the seed tray to larger pots according to their growth, and turn to Ezequiel to decide (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 16/03/22). He is seen by the rest as the one who possesses more technical knowledge for managing the plant nursery. He frequently explains many details to other participants regarding the region's ecosystem and the well-being of plants. For instance, I observed him explaining to volunteers how a certain plant species attracts caterpillars of a particular species of butterfly (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 16/03/22). On a different occasion, he also carefully described to me how charcoal has beneficial properties, after I pointed out there were pieces of it in the soil they use for planting (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 06/04/22).

In some way, Ezequiel takes up much of the role that was formerly only fulfilled by the NGO *Semillas*, in providing technical advice for working in the plant nursery. In this way, the group of workers can counteract the more powerful influence that this NGO had in the beginning of the project.

Formal higher education institutions are not the only way in which participants get to learn and develop their skills, which is crucial in these initiatives in order to participate effectively. In fact, UTT, the union present in the Entre Ríos case, has Co.Te.Po, which, as presented in the previous chapter, is a support network formed by the workers themselves. It is defined as popular technical consultation, meaning that workers provide technical support to their peers. Co.Te.Po. members teach how to employ agroecological methods in workshops and meetings at different scales. Co.Te.Po. follows a tradition in the agroecological movement in Latin America, where those employing agroecological methods share their experiences in peer-based networks known as "farmer to farmer" or "peasant to peasant" (*campesino a campesino*) (Bernal

et al., 2023; Rosset et al., 2011; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012; Val et al., 2019).

In Entre Ríos, it is highly valued for workers to hold some extent of agroecological training prior to being allocated a spot to work in the *colonia*. This is not the case in Buenos Aires, as I describe in the upcoming Subsection 5.3.2. Mateo tells me during an interview that Co.Te.Po. technicians such as himself were asked first if they wanted to take part in the new initiative in Entre Ríos. This was because they were already familiar to agroecological practices, so they could start working with the soil to prepare it for future production, as well as host workshops and train other workers. That basic knowledge that Co.Te.Po. members provide constitutes, then, a necessary foundation for the initiative. After the first call, further producers were contacted: workers who were already using this method, and also other were willing to learn the agroecological approach (Interview with Mateo, worker, Entre Ríos, 10/11/22).

Mateo's expertise as a Co.Te.Po. technician is highly appreciated by their peers at the workplace, similarly to the role that Ezequiel takes in Buenos Aires. Andrés regards Mateo as an "open encyclopedia", someone well-informed who is also fond of sharing his knowledge to everyone and helping co-workers. He expresses how much he values that Mateo "isn't selfish", does not "keep [knowledge] to himself, he shares all of the knowledge that he has been learning year after year in all the trainings he has undergone throughout the country". Andrés remembers how Mateo taught him how to prepare bioinputs, natural fungicides, and a variety of slurries including nettle and garlic slurry[36] (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

In view of this, I consider that knowledge becomes a form of capital in the participatory setting as long as it is shared, disseminated to the rest of the participants at the workplace. For that reason, I understand it as a quality for acting in public, and not an attribute that is supposed to be protected in private, shielded from its collective use. Thus, it can be distinguished from the concept of capital in Bourdieu's theory. Capitals are attributes that give recognition and prestige to the ones that are seen as its holders, something that

[36] These slurries are plant-based fertilisers used in alternative agriculture.

can be noticed in the examples of Mateo and Ezequiel. However, his theory focuses on capitals working as sources of competition and dispute between actors (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). I show, instead, that these attributes are valued precisely when being shared with others. This is explained by Andrés with the metaphor of the "open encyclopedia" to describe Mateo's disposition to share. Here, it is about acting with others, hence its publicness.

Ghose and Pettygrove (2014) have indicated the existence of "barriers to participation" in urban gardens that end up excluding groups that lack financial resources. Authors mention, for instance, the difficulty of navigating specific procedures to get a permit for land use or get a monetary grant. Having specialised agroecological knowledge could be another barrier, as not all participants are like Ezequiel or Mateo. But in the cases studied not all workers need to be previously trained in order to start their participation in the initiatives.

In this regard, participants also assign value to the capacity of embracing workers who have been excluded from the possibility of getting a job in the conventional labour market, have difficulties accessing a plot of land for working, and are generally facing a challenging situation. Especially in these cases, it would not be necessary to demonstrate prior expertise. It is presumed that workers could learn in the process of working. I find that this is more prominent in the Buenos Aires case, where the labour union particularly problematises the existence of social exclusion and makes the category of the 'excluded' a form of political subjectification for the workers. I further elucidate this point next.

5.3.2 "No one is going to judge you about your past"

Participants in Buenos Aires argue that a major focus of the project is about giving a job prospect for people that have fewer possibilities of being "hireable" in the conventional labour market. They indicate several reasons that might explain them being excluded when trying to get a job in a traditional way, by sending their CVs to potential employers. These include being discriminated by reasons of age, gender, lack of prior experience, having a criminal record, or

substance use problems (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, August 2022).

For instance, Gabriela, one of the workers, tells me that during her younger adulthood she devoted herself to being a mother, and was unable to gain significant working experience beyond domestic labours. But as years passed, it became harder to sustain the economy of her family, and she needed an income, although her possibilities were scarce in her situation (Interview with Gabriela, worker, Buenos Aires, 02/03/22). Diego, her co-worker, reflects on this kind of situations and how popular economy workplaces can become an alternative to this exclusion:

> Housewives who at fifty have to go find a job are excluded, because they don't have the knowledge, because they dedicated themselves to the housework, to taking care of their children, because they have no work experience, because their last relationship with the outside world was twenty-five, thirty years ago. As life and the world changes every two months, that is, with twenty-five years of being outside of the labour system it is almost impossible to be able to be included by yourself (…). The only thing they have is their workforce, and are clearly excluded. So, instead of going to work cleaning houses by the hour, a woman can participate in a cooperative process, in a popular economy movement that not only integrates her, but also gives her a supporting framework for personal, economic, and emotional development (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22).

The case of Gabriela is indicative of a particular form of exclusion, a gendered one mixed with an age factor. Asymmetrical gender relations are expressed in the unequal distribution of social reproduction labour, carried out mostly by women without receiving a wage. This restricts women's social and economic opportunities, resulting in their exclusion from public life (Bak McKenna, 2021). Popular economy initiatives aim to provide an alternative to these situations.

Participants prioritise making the workplace a site of support for the right of people to work. This is not without its tensions, and participants recognise that this might work against the initiative's profitability, by reducing productivity levels: a tension they need to navigate if they are to be faithful to their ideals.

Accordingly, their purpose is to subvert the "throwaway culture"[37]. This idea indicates an intention to counteract capitalism's tendency of "discarding" manual workers, when their labour force is not needed anymore in order to make more money (Interview with Alejandro, worker, Buenos Aires, 01/04/22). This is in line with the union's Blue Book conceptualisations, which defines popular economy as the economy of the excluded, "all of the activities that result from the market's inability to offer us all a decent and well-paid job as workers in a factory or a company" (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014, p. 33)[38]. The labour union aims to recognise and promote rights for the excluded workers.

Workers in the Buenos Aires case highlight this endeavour by elaborating on the concept of "social inclusion". They debate over its significance as an aim of the group in a collective assembly that I observe. Sitting in a circle inside the greenhouse during a rainy day, I listen to them stating that "social inclusion" means that working should not be dependent on having a job interview where they could be discarded on the basis of their past lives. Having a job should be based solely on the fact of being willing to work (*tener ganas de trabajar*), and trusting each other's commitment. "When you come here, no one is going to judge you about your past, but not out of disinterest but rather out of non-judgment", I log them saying (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 04/03/22).

Showing willingness to work emerges, then, as a principle that should guide the participation in the initiative and which forms the subjectivity of the worker. This can be expressed by showing interest in learning, which for them means making the most of the possibilities offered by the workplace. This place is denoted as an educational space, "a place to develop yourself". They contrast this willingness to the attitude of former participants who realised that they did not like all of the implications of being a land worker, so they ended up leaving.

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[37] The concept of "throwaway culture" is rooted in Pope Francis' elaborations on contemporary attitudes towards marginalised people, who are treated as disposable, much like discarded goods that become leftovers (C. Clark & Alford, 2019). UTEP's *referente*, Juan Grabois, expands upon Pope Francis' ideas for his postulates about social exclusion. See: Grabois (2013, 2014).

[38] The discarding phenomenon is attributed to increasing patterns of labour mechanisation, for example, with biotechnologies replacing farmer's manual jobs (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014), global downward wage pressures, the spread of financial speculation, compulsive consumerism, extractivism of common goods, and the reduction of welfare states (Grabois, 2013).

In the workplace they “discover who really likes to work here”, they say, which is shown by “being willing to self-improve” by learning (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 04/03/22).

Working in the popular economy is defined as creating a job ‘from nothing’. This is signified by participants as starting a project from square one, and slowly becoming a land worker by taking part in training sessions, asking other participants, and practising how to do it (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 04/03/22). In fact, the majority of the workers in the Buenos Aires case do not have extensive prior experience as land workers.

> The project started from scratch, meaning that the knowledge most of the people here had, (…) prior knowledge of what transplanting was like, sowing, the issue of seeds, how to treat them, how to file them down, etc., was zero or none, there was no prior knowledge. So, as time went by, knowledge was imparted to us, we incorporated that knowledge and then after you incorporate it, put it into practice and ask questions, more questions arise about how to change your ways, improve (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22).

These extracts illustrate how participants form their subjectivity by highlighting their agency in their process of becoming popular economy workers. Requiring prior qualifications in agroecology and related fields would be exclusionary. Rather, what matters is how they become in the doing.

This leads to questioning the notion of ‘excluded worker’ as a form of political subjectification, and its relation to my proposal of understanding publicness in these settings as participatory and labour oriented. During the 1980s and 1990s, the category of social exclusion was extensively adopted in the public policy agenda in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom and France (Byrne, 2005). It facilitated the understanding of a series of social changes associated with the erosion of the former social model, which was centred on labour relations and the protections associated with this status. The social question was no longer defined around the issue of labour, and the category of worker lost its centrality (Castel, 2002; Merklen, 2010). The former status of worker included shared social guarantees that the population could rely on to defend themselves against life’s risks. But with the crisis of that model, that defence was individualised and decollectivised. Individuals are forced to face life contingencies on their

own. In this context, the category of the "excluded" indicates collections of individuals with variegated trajectories, with not much in common but the lack of social protections (Castel, 2004). In connection with this concept, the idea of "social inclusion" as an objective of social policies in Argentina gained widespread use after 2003. It was defined by the official discourse as the promotion of social integration through formal, stable, and protected forms of employment (Hopp & Lijterman, 2019).

The model proposed by the labour movements of the popular economy in Argentina seeks to recollectivise these social protections. They advocate in favour of giving a renewed centrality to the notion of worker, but adapted to the societal dynamics of the 21st century with the emergence of the popular economy sector. In Diego's words, the popular economy movement aims to integrate workers in a cooperative process where they can find a "supporting framework" for their life (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22). At the same time, popular economy movements denounce the limitations of the 'social inclusion' policies of the 2000s in Argentina, showing that the promise of formal and protected labour for all was not achieved.

As I show here, participants in the Buenos Aires case study feel conflicted by the category of 'excluded' as a form of subjectification. 'Excluded worker' appears as a contradictory concept. Accounts of the working class in terms of the "socially excluded" could make them appear as lacking agency and being disempowered, restricted to the rearguard (Cumbers et al., 2010). This is something that participants themselves problematise: they do not want to be seen as passive actors by the rest of the society. So, they discuss if 'excluded' is, indeed, the right word to identify them.

Workers own clothes with the imprinted initials of the movement, MTE. They frequently use them as their workwear. During the same assembly, they point out that putting on a shirt that says "excluded" may reflect a reality, however, society might not understand it and further stigmatise them (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 04/03/22). As a category of practice (Brubaker, 2013), 'excluded' is used by the labour movement to identify the workers they aim to represent and advocate for their rights. That is, it is a form of self-identification. However, participants discuss how this

identification is transformed by the way in which others signify the word. The "other-identification" has the power to change the "self-identification" (Brubaker, 2013) and cast a negative shadow over it. They mention, in the assembly, that the idea is to "keep going" and not just simply remain there, "waiting" passively as an "excluded" person (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 04/03/22). 'Excluded', then, becomes negatively connotated in this regard, not as an active participant but someone who passively waits and is not willing to improve. It is the contrary of the formulation of the workers' subjectivity as having an active disposition to learn and share knowledge.

If being excluded is a condition that participation in the initiative aims to change, it makes sense for workers to have a debate over this word's connotation, as well as being afraid of dominant views in mainstream society that sees them as the ones that do not belong. Prefiguratively, they want to highlight the positive aspects of their work. They define themselves by asserting their agency as active learners and indicating a positive work disposition. Them wanting to change their status as excluded is enough to craft alternative words to designate themselves. This is why they stress, instead, on the idea of social inclusion.

I understand that theorisations over the excluded, including the ones reflected in the union's Blue Book, make a clear case for the usage of this notion to define the features of the emergent working class of this century. Workers of the initiative also understand that it is a "political position" (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 04/03/22). With that, they mean that it is a useful category to designate and denounce the structural inequalities of contemporary capitalism. It is helpful to make us question what is behind that exclusion, what are the social processes and dynamics at the structural level that lead to the exclusion of huge segments of the population from accessing the labour market. Particularly, as Byrne (2005) indicates, the term helps to counteract the idea that it is something that individuals do to themselves, because exclusion is a process carried out by certain actors on others.

However, the adequacy of this word to reflect not just the defensive but the active dimension of their participation in these initiatives is less clear.

Participants do not want to be seen as subjects who are passively waiting, but as active workers immersed in productive and learning processes. If these settings aim to promote the participation of the "part that has no part" in the "police order" in Rancière (1999)'s terms, then, the category of "excluded" as a form of subjectification does not do justice to their active involvement. The "excluded" already have a "part" in the "police order" and it is one of stigmatisation. Being a worker and a producer, instead, enunciates an active position.

These debates over social inclusion presented by participants are helpful for this thesis' conceptualisation of publicness. On the one hand, being included no matter one's past is a feature of the workplace in Buenos Aires that participants hold in high esteem. This element challenges elitist conceptions of the public, making it a space where anyone can participate, even the ones who had a problematic past from the standpoint of the labour market. On the other hand, it is not an entirely unconditional form of publicness. It depends on the willingness to participate, to show an active disposition to learn and share. Far from being a passive form of the public, it demonstrates a more active sense of labour.

5.4 Participation as working among peers

Continuing with the conceptualisation of the form of publicness within these cases, in this section I present how participants organise their everyday working routines and run the workplaces following the principle of working among peers, *sin patrón* (without a boss).

One of the features of workplaces in the popular economy is the way in which they organise relations between workers, following alternative principles to that of the classic relation between employee and employer. Popular economy movements promote egalitarian arrangements within the workplace and advocate for the elimination of forms of work "when some live off the work of others for the sole fact of being stronger, owning the workplace, having machines, etc." (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014, p. 39). Compared to traditional privately owned companies, these experiences demonstrate that it is possible for workplaces to be organised in a more horizontal way, in which the participation and subjectivity of the workers becomes central (Kasparian, 2020).

In Argentina, a frequent idea used to designate this alternative organisation that questions dependency relations is *trabajo sin patrón*, which means working without a boss. During the country's economic recession towards the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, the notion of *trabajo sin patrón* emerged as one of the causes of the unemployed workers movements. Numerous companies went bankrupt. Seeking to keep their job position, workers from some of these companies took over their factories and reformulated them into worker-run cooperatives (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007; Coraggio & Arroyo, 2009; Dinerstein, 2007; Rebón, 2005). This first wave of *sin patrón* experiences were created on the basis of existing factories. There, the employees themselves, in the face of the company's bankruptcy, and in absence of the employers, occupied these factories and reformulated their management.

But newer *sin patrón* experiences, like the ones explored by my research, represent a different phenomenon. As part of the popular economy sector, they are not built upon the foundations of existing factories. Workers are creating their workplaces from zero, and are not part of a previously constituted working group. They represent one of the forms of the new working-class in the 21st century.

Particularly, the *sin patrón* principle is updated and acquires new meanings in the contemporary agroecological experiences. In the cases studied, participants draw a parallel between working without a boss and working with nature, with 'living beings' or 'living matter', as they say. They believe that the workplaces would not work well if there was a person commanding and dictating how to work. They observe that working with 'living beings' requires greater flexibility, dynamism, and a specific dedication that cannot be given from above. Special attention and care need to be given to their 'living beings', because their needs of fluctuate throughout different times of the day and year. In Ezequiel's words:

> I feel that it would be strange [to work with a boss] because we are working with living matter, so even if a person comes to give orders and tells you how things should turn out, they are not always going to turn out as you thought (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22).

In comparison with other types of work, tasks in an agroecological setting cannot be carried out at any moment in time. Ezequiel reflects that many tasks in an office or factory setting can be performed at any given moment. There is no care responsibility for a living organism. This makes it easier to give instructions centrally, from the top-down. On the contrary, working with 'living beings' requires from each worker a particular dedication, proximity to the animals and plants, observation, and attention to particularity.

> You have to put aside certain expectations, understand the seasonality of the tasks. Perhaps, drawing a parallel, perhaps in a company that is dedicated, I don't know, to cutting papers, you can do the same during winter, summer, at any time you can do the same with a machine. Here, as we work with plants, with living matter, if you missed the fruit harvesting season then you lost that species for the entire year. During summer, you must carry out different tasks than in winter. It is very dynamic (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22).

A single person from above, argues Ezequiel, could not retain that much information or attend that many variables. Many eyes are needed in close proximity to the plants and animals that they are taking care. Consequently, this would make centralised commands inefficient.

This is because agroecological spaces aim to produce in a harmonious way with nature, that is, in way that follows the natural ecosystemic processes that are specific to determinate geographies. This specificity needs to be discovered by paying close attention to how the 'living beings' evolve each day. Timmerman and Félix use an interesting metaphor to describe this journey of discovering the particularities of nature that agroecological work entails: "if conventional farming is like driving a car to a fixed destination, agroecological farming comes closer to a hitchhiking voyage" (2015, p. 531). Agroecological 'hitchhikers' are required to pay greater attention to preserve the and help the delicate balances of the agroecosystem. It is an intellectually demanding job, opposed to the extractive character of 'conventional' agribusiness that focuses on the end product but not on the ongoing caring relation with living organisms. Caring for that balance makes agroecological work meaningful for the farmers, Timmerman and Félix (2015) argue. Agroecological workplaces are stimulating environments, where participants learn new skills and observe different occurrences on a daily basis.

5.4.1 Independent and self-managed work

In this subsection, I describe how participants consider taking part in the initiatives as a way of freeing themselves from the oppression experienced from working under dependency relations. They resignify the notion of responsibility, not as blindly following orders, but in association with a sense of autonomy and independence that forms the worker subjectivity. Later, I draw attention to some participants' indications on the principle of horizontality, to prevent a romanticised portrayal of worker-run initiatives, present in some of the literature.

Both Andrés and Mateo in Entre Ríos share during interviews their past experiences of having worked under relations of dependency in the private sector. They understand that being able to work in the *colonia* as UTT members and having transitioned to the use of agroecological methods put them in a more favourable situation.

Andrés' decision to become an agroecological producer was linked to his search for working in an independent way, that is, not depending on an employer. He wanted to become his "own employer" and "own employee", "everything together", says. He used to work in the construction sector, but it got to the point where he felt really tired of his "superior" giving him a hard time and telling him off "every five minutes" (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

Mateo also remembers feeling this kind of fatigue from his work in a "conventional" farm, using pesticides. He describes this type of work as "very intensive" and oppressive. They were pressured to maximise yields, to produce in larger quantities, irrespective of how or why. It demanded "many hours of work", "fourteen hours, sixteen hours a day":

> We were always enslaved to work, we couldn't have time for ourselves, it was just working. If you left the job, it became more complicated for you. In other words, it was like we entered a system that we couldn't get out of, and it was like we couldn't think. Now, I start to view and analyse all those moments, and I tell myself: other possibilities exist for doing this, to generate in another way, think in another way. And, in all the years that we had been producing there,

> everything was in that direction, for that side, to work under commands. And there, we worked under commands (Interview with Mateo, worker, Entre Ríos, 10/11/22).

Working in an agroecological space, on the contrary, is seen by participants as a way of being able to manage their own time. It also represents a means of resistance against the exclusive mindset of productivity and maximisation of yields and profits with no consideration to any other issue.

They stress the relevance of taking some time to rest as well as to think, and not act like a robot deprived of their free will. They search for ways "to not saturate ourselves at work", to achieve tranquillity, and avoid being "accelerated with a lot of things" (Interview with Mateo, worker, Entre Ríos, 24/11/22). By being 'independent' they have greater flexibility to manage their own schedule.

Hence, the idea of 'independence' is understood by them as a way of working that is not exploitative, and not subordinated to the will of another person that supresses their own thoughts and need to have some rest. It is tied to an experience of freedom, in opposition to the oppression lived while working under relations of dependency. They could no longer bear with that lived feeling of oppression. Freedom is thus seen as acting in a space where there is no subordination, but a sense of equality among other participants that work alongside of each other and do not look at the rest of the teamwork from above.

Participants in Buenos Aires also emphasise the importance of being able to work among peers, without having to depend on the orders of an employer or boss. They define their workplace as self-managed, meaning for them that there is not an external person who decides what to do. Workers themselves sit down to think and decide on the activities, with everyone having the possibility of equally expressing themselves.

In the Entre Ríos case, workers regard the collective participation in the initiative as a way of getting free from some of their past experiences as individuals working under relations of dependency. In Buenos Aires, the experience that serves as a contrast was lived by them at the beginning of the project, in relation to one of the NGOs.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, workers and NGO advisors in Buenos Aires presented some divergences regarding how the group should manage the workplace. While the NGO promoted an entrepreneur subjectivity, and more hierarchical relations between trainers and trainees; the labour union proposed a cooperative model, where the workers lead, and the NGO is a 'helping hand'.

The process of gaining 'independence' from the NGO involved a progressive differentiation with respect to them. The NGO was in the end displaced of decision-making functions in favour of the workers. This implied, for the workers, a change in their perceived subjectivity. The trainee subjectivity was one permeated by feelings of unpreparedness. In contrast, the worker subjectivity recognises in themselves enough capabilities to be in charge of the initiative.

> When you just have started, you may think that you are not prepared, or that you do not have much knowledge. And well, then, over time, you realise that yes, we have that capacity, and we have a responsibility in the workplace, and we can move forward. See what I mean? They were just a helping hand, which we still have today but from a different position, because we manage it ourselves (Interview with Gabriela, worker, Buenos Aires, 02/03/22).

In this process, workers noted that the NGO did not fully embrace the idea of the workplace being a "collective good" (Interview with Luciano, worker, Buenos Aires, 28/03/22). This is a sense of publicness where the subaltern group is inverting the hegemonic norms where the trainers lead, and the trainees passively learn and execute. The trainees become workers responsible for commanding the plant nursery and the food garden.

Besides, participants think that this group dynamic can only occur in a workplace where they prioritise getting to know their co-workers, which results in being able to develop a 'human bond'. It is an understanding that individuals are not self-sufficient, but that the entire initiative depends on the work of everyone. This resonates with Timmerman and Félix's (2015) descriptions of agroecological work environments. In such settings, the variety of tasks demands from workers to be able to coordinate their labour. They need to work together and build on each other's contributions to progress. Participants in my research realise that working among peers entails putting aside individualistic attitudes that one may

have internalised in the past. They observe that becoming a worker in this popular economy setting is learning that other co-workers can sometimes do some tasks better than oneself, and also, appreciating that the work of others is also valuable (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22).

Developing listening dynamics is essential to put into practice the 'human bond' to which the participants allude. This is defined as engaging in a participatory setting where participants are "empathetic", interested in "getting to know each other's lives". They are not only there to fulfil attendance requirements, but also get emotionally involved with the well-being of all (Interview with Constanza, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 27/06/22).

To sum up, two associated senses of freedom can be identified in the workers' definition and valorisation of 'independent' and '*sin patrón*' way of working. First, is about getting free of forms of dependent work, where the workers are not the ones in charge of managing the workplace. In Entre Ríos this is expressed by the workers as a sense of liberation of earlier job positions where they were pressured by managers. For the Buenos Aires case, this is represented by them inverting their position from trainees to leading workers, challenging the entrepreneurial model that the NGO proposed as a way of conducting the workplace. The first sense of freedom as liberation is complemented by a change in their subjectivity. It is about feeling capable to collectively plan and direct activities. It also encompasses acquiring a sense of relatedness and collectivity among the co-workers, which is not necessarily something that participants had the chance of experiencing in their past. It is about understanding that the work of others is also valuable, and that self-sufficiency cannot be achieved individually.

5.4.2 Beyond the "textbook method"

The sense of freedom presented above leads to a discussion on the horizontal character of these initiatives. A generalised and embellished portrait of horizontality as the guiding principle of Argentinian social movements can be found in some accounts (Dinerstein, 2008; Sitrin, 2012; Svampa & Pereyra, 2009). This reflects the spirit of the early 2000s politically effervescent conjuncture. However, it has been observed that in the long run, in workers'

self-managed factories, collective structures of decision-making, consensus, and wide participation, coexist with the existence of leaderships and smaller directive councils and coordinators (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007; Kasparian, 2020; Rebón, 2005). In line with this second perspective, situated in the workplaces, I agree with the need of having a more nuanced and practical perspective on how current popular economy workplaces function.

Both work teams in Buenos Aires and Entre Ríos have common instances of debate and decision-making where all the workers can equally participate. Initially, there are daily instances of group planning to decide on the tasks for each day and immediate operational decisions. There are also meetings every few months where they take stock and discuss priorities and plans for the long term. The Buenos Aires group of workers has a greater level of autonomy in the planning, compared to Entre Ríos, when they also depend on the objectives and strategies that the local government designs for the reserve and *colonia*.

There is a tendency to describe participatory settings in a stationary manner, focusing on how they are designed and which procedures they follow, as if the dynamics were planned beforehand. This was the approach to which I was familiarised while researching institutional participatory and deliberative settings. In my previous research on participatory budgeting, I describe its dynamic as rituals and routines with different phases marked by specific rules, dictated by the municipal government, that prescribe the behaviour of participants (Arpini, 2020). A similar perspective is observed in the literature discussing deliberative mini-publics designs (Fishkin, 2003; Fung, 2003; Harris, 2019).

However, this approach is not particularly effective for approaching these popular economy workplaces. This is because of their dynamic, intuitive, unregulated, and non-ritualised attributes. Emilio in the Entre Ríos case explains this idea as follows, when asked about how they make their decisions:

> We don’t have a textbook method, there is no textbook method, this was just something that happened, there isn’t, I don't know if you are referring to something in particular but we do it by intuition for making decisions, always in a very, well, how to say it, we all are,

> generally we all agree or at least that's what it seems (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22).

I believe, now, that our theories should be open to the possibility that, in practice, there could be no specific and fixed design on how to participate. Still, participatory settings can function, although not accommodating to the neat protocolised descriptions prevalent in the literature.

Although participants have a positive assessment regarding the existence of the collective spaces of debate, they also indicate that these discussions can take up a lot of time and lead to disorganisation. Some may feel at times that it would be easier if someone else took the decisions, rather than "sitting down and thinking" together (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22). The production and commercialisation of agroecological goods is one of the main aims of the initiatives, which the workers need to sustain themselves. Hence, they also put emphasis on the need of being "efficient" and "disciplined" to get things done. Their participation is not a mere hobby, a "pastime" to "watch birds," and "get vitamin from the sun". It requires being productive, "time, effort, and sacrifice" (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22) in order to make ends meet.

Considering this, both workplaces implement forms of task division to manage their daily activities. They have distinct areas, with assigned responsibilities to specific workers for each area, as described in Section 4.2 of the previous chapter. In Buenos Aires, these areas include commercialisation, communication, food garden production, native plant nursery, and construction and repairs. In Entre Ríos, there is the reserve area and the *colonia* area, the latter dedicated to growing vegetables and fruits and the livestock.

While there are a few examples of *sin patrón* workplaces where job rotation has been implemented as an organising labour principle, workers eventually decide to revert to forms of labour division. This is because of the obstacles posed by the need to count with specialisations in particular skills (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007; Rebón, 2005).

Adrián in Buenos Aires provides a clear rationale on the need of establishing a task and responsibility distribution system. In the beginning of their project, there was no such task division system. He observes that if each worker was doing “a little bit of everything” but not anything in particular, it was inefficient and unproductive. A multitasking system resulted in the stagnation of the project, since no one had a clear understanding of what they needed to do collectively, or whether a certain task was already done or not. Altogether, this also had a negative impact on the general workplace atmosphere, generating a feeling of confusion. Adrián indicates that this negatively impacted the participation and commitment of the workers, because it generated a contagious sense of “disinterest” and “apathy” (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22).

> In the long run, that disinterest or apathy has repercussions on the entire group. Because it is a rung that is starting to crack, and the rest of the ladder is also like 'why doesn't it work here?' And we noticed it, there is a change. A before and after the designation of tasks by people, by sectors. The change is noticeable, it is fundamental (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22).

Adrián’s reflections echoes one of Atzeni and Ghigliani’s (2007) findings for the first wave of *sin patrón* cases: in the absence of vertical disciplinary structures, participants emphasise the relevance of a sense of internal responsibility for each worker. In this line, a benefit of dividing tasks mentioned by Adrián is that it provides a sense of personal fulfilment. He explains it in the following way: if each person focuses on a specific area and understands their responsibilities, it enhances their sense of freedom and autonomy, since they can accomplish these tasks by themselves without feeling the weight of being permanently controlled by “superiors” (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22). This is a sense of fulfilment that is associated with the principle of *sin patrón* way of working. There is not a higher authority to whom they need to work for, so the responsibility is for themselves.

Finally, as achieving this task division system is oriented towards a collective ethos, it may involve certain individual concessions. This is the case of Eliana in Buenos Aires. When she started to participate, she experienced an affinity for the food garden area, perceiving a “really nice energy” there. However, the group required workers in the “commercialisation and communication” area of

the project. Eliana had some previous knowledge of social media management, so she changed her focus to that area, even though it was not her individual preference (Interview with Eliana, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/04/22). The role of each worker makes sense within the framework of the larger group with collective needs.

5.5 Conclusions

This chapter continues the discussion presented in Chapter 4 about the kind of collective actors that are constituted as the creators of the workplaces that are the focus of my thesis. Publicness can be thought of as plurality, formed by a mosaic of collaborating participants. One of these mosaics becomes central for understanding the everyday life of these public spaces. That is why this chapter focuses on the identification of the worker and producer as a prevalent form of subjectivity in these workplaces. These are labour-oriented public spaces, guided by the objective of producing agroecological goods for the workers to make a living, as well as for social inclusion and environmental regeneration.

I aim to expand the research on municipalism and agroecological movements by considering a different form of subjectivity, defined by being a worker and producer. This also addresses an issue identified in the community gardens literature, which recognises their limitation to promote the participation of working-class participants. To do this effectively, I acknowledge that participants can be motivated to participate by a desire to generate income and achieve economic stability. This motivation should not be seen as a secondary or less valid reason for their involvement. It is just as important as any other motivation, including the commitment to environmental care that is central to these initiatives. I recognise how participants construct publicness through their own accounts.

These spaces are formed through the active participation of subordinated groups, creating a form of publicness that overtly questions rather than brackets structural social inequalities (Fraser, 1990). Particularly in the Buenos Aires group, there is an explicit intention to address issues of social exclusion, by welcoming participants with labour trajectories that are underestimated in the job market. They even debate if ‘excluded worker’ is the right category to call

themselves, preferring the notion of ‘social inclusion’ to emphasise their active disposition to participate and learn, in opposition to the ‘discarding’ tendency of the capitalist system.

A significant barrier to participation in agroecological work can be the lack of specialised knowledge required for the tasks involved. In the analysed contexts, possessing agroecological knowledge is essential for effective public participation. The success of these initiatives largely depends on this expertise. However, to foster social inclusion and the participatory nature of these initiatives, not all workers need to have prior training to begin their involvement. Instead, these settings promote peer training and knowledge sharing among participants. In this collaborative environment, knowledge becomes a valuable capital as long as it is shared and disseminated among the workers at the site.

Additionally, these workers organise themselves into ‘*sin patrón*’ collective groups, valuing their freedom to work without a boss and not within dependent employment relationships. The experiences analysed in this thesis represent a second generation of ‘*sin patrón*’ initiatives in Argentina, as they are not built upon the foundations of existing factories. Instead, workers are creating their workplaces and working groups from scratch. To make progress, they need to collaborate and build on each other’s contributions. Participants recognise that working among peers requires them to set aside individualistic attitudes and work collectively.

The ‘*sin patrón*’ principle has been updated and takes on new meanings when combined with contemporary agroecological practices. This approach contrasts with the extractive nature of ‘conventional’ agribusiness, which focuses solely on the end product and neglects the ongoing caring relationship with living organisms. Additionally, it is important not to romanticise these initiatives as examples of perfect horizontal organization. Moments of collective decision-making coexist with coordinating roles, as well as forms of labour division and distributions of responsibilities among individuals.

The popular economy worker and producer is a concrete and situated form of public subjectivity that designates participants who seek to make a proper

living, create a learning atmosphere, and work in settings where there is no *patrón* but co-workers self-managing the place. It is their way of pursuing a fulfilling life, of subsisting but also transcending subsisting and creating a transformative experience in their daily lives, for themselves and for socio-environmental well-being. They want to receive a fair compensation for their efforts, and free themselves of dependent employment relations. They create workplaces where others are seen as peers, and they teach and learn about agroecological methods.

In the next chapter, I further elaborate on the definition of the publicness which is created in the case studies. I show how participants create the workplaces' spatiality oriented by productive and socio-environmental aims at the same time.

Chapter 6 The public as a space for production and socio-environmental commitment

6.1 Introduction

After having addressed how publicness can be defined as plural and labour oriented within the context of my case studies, in this chapter, I consider the form that publicness takes in relation to the spatiality of the workplaces. I show that rather than being a non-tangible, abstract notion, the construction of the public demands a material dimension. It happens in concrete sites, imagined and built by a plurality of participants. I follow Smith and Low's (2006) suggestion for a spatialised analysis of the public. They observe that generally, political theorists have contributed to the conceptualisation of the public sphere as a universalistic and undifferentiated ideal. In contrast, they indicate that the public sphere has clear geographies and a history, and the analysis cannot be abstracted from these factors.

Spaces can be thought of as social constructions, the product of social relations and practices that constitute them (Harvey, 2012; Lefebvre, 1991; M. Low, 2004; Massey, 2005). They are not immutable landscapes, but the product of processes of signification by the subjects that act within that space (Lefebvre, 1991). With their practices, participants in my research turn vacant spaces into meaningful spaces, workplaces, adapted to their needs of production and socio-environmental visions. Workers spend a large part of their time to build and bring them to life.

As workplaces, they are different to the common ideas that come to mind when thinking about public spaces. Public spaces can be streets and roads, squares and parks, areas of transit for the most part. These are, for most, temporary public spaces, in the sense that they are destined for its use for a few minutes or hours. In cities, they can become "places of avoidance rather than encounter" (Madanipour, 2010, p. 6). Participatory community gardens and growing spaces in general are a different kind of public space. They require the active participation of people, and this commitment is what makes these spaces thrive. But, for the most part, these have been conceived, primarily, as spaces of leisure and escape, offering participants a place to have a break from their work

routines, disconnect, and linger, getting away from the noise and pollution of the city to an aesthetically pleasant environment (Aptekar, 2015; Filkobski et al., 2016; Hale et al., 2011; Traill, 2023). In contrast, workplaces in this thesis, though being also green spaces for plant growing and participation, are not places to get away from routines. These sites are part of workers' daily routines, where they participate to make a living and also demonstrate their socio-environmental commitment.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section addresses how participants transform the spaces, from places that were abandoned and degraded, to workplaces where they can develop their agroecological practices. I conceptualise their initiatives as deprivatisation processes, proposing an understanding of this concept in both spatial and temporal ways. Participants present images of privatisation as a contrast to their efforts, in relation to a situation in the past in the Entre Ríos case, or a possible future in Buenos Aires. Their participation is signified as a shield against privatisation processes.

I observe that these efforts unfold in contexts of resource scarcity. Participants reconstruct the materiality of the spaces from scraps, a metaphor that I use to symbolise the type of elements that they reutilise, rebuild, reuse, repair, regenerate, borrow, or get via public funding to build the workplaces. Then, I show how they are invested in a kind of participation that merges social and environmental concerns. They implement forms of production that at the same time aim to regenerate the environment. These practices renew old spaces and makes public materiality last, survive, and adapt to the current socio-historical context of the popular economy sector. Thus, their practices reveal the protective character of participation against pervasive forms of privatisation and state retrenchment present throughout contemporary spatialities.

The second section examines the conflictive aspect involved in building these public spatialities. These are conflicts that arise in a context characterised by socio-economic inequalities, in the case located in Buenos Aires, and political contestation of agribusiness as the hegemonic model of development, in the case situated in Entre Ríos. This leads to participants experiencing forms of class discrimination as well as xenophobic attitudes on the side of the opponents, who present their opposition to the existence of the workplaces under the banners of

protection and preservation of the environment and the historical heritage of the sites. In contrast, participants that lead these initiatives question this conservationist approach, arguing from a socio-environmental perspective that considers the need to be socially inclusive, rather than wanting to achieve pristine spaces.

6.2 Recovering a place for productive purposes

Urban agriculture experiences have been for long identified as responses to contexts of spatial crisis: conditions of economic downturn, disinvestment, deprivation, and state retrenchment. Vacant urban spaces in conditions of decay are rebuilt by participants to become growing places (Crossan et al., 2016; Cumbers et al., 2018; Drake & Lawson, 2014; Kurtz, 2001; McKay, 2011; Thompson, 2015). This phenomenon has also been noticed in Argentina for the case of Rosario, where unemployed people participated in the creation of agroecological Garden Parks (*Parques Huerta*) in highway verges, stream shores, and the side of railroad tracks (Lattuca, 2012; Lattuca et al., 2014).

The case studies in this thesis are also a phenomenon situated in a complex period of Argentinian history. During the last decade the country has been experiencing the decomposition of the post-neoliberal model of governance that characterised the so-called “pink tide” of progressive governments in the Latin American region. This is combined, as reviewed in this thesis, with the structural tendency of disintegration of the wage society model of organisation, of which the emergency of the popular economy is the result. But these spaces are not merely sites for creating precarious modes of surviving. Following Crossan et al. (2016), I believe there is room for the creation of alternative kinds of politics, even in daunting economic circumstances.

Situated in this socio-historical context, the case studies in this thesis are created in lands that are state-owned. Both spaces underwent a period of decay before the arrival of the initiatives I study, as a direct consequence of state retrenchment. In the case located in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, these lands were left practically abandoned during the 1990s, losing the social function they use to have in the past by hosting childhood public services. In Entre Ríos, the lands used to be concessioned to a private school and the city

racing circuit, which left the place in a degraded condition, as participants recall. The withdrawal of the state was noticeable in the abandonment of these public spaces. With these new projects, these public spaces return to life. But they are constructed into a different kind of public space, a plural one, which depends on the engagement of participants in but also beyond the state.

Both cases can be characterised as examples of a broader phenomenon of "space recovering" specific to the Argentinian context. "Space recovering" is a phenomenon by which popular sectors settle in and reconvert vacant idle spaces for collective and long-term socio-political purposes. It is different to classic forms of squatting focused on the individual survival (Carman & Yacovino, 2007). During the early 2000s, the phenomenon gained public notoriety with many neighbourhood assemblies in Buenos Aires occupying abandoned urban buildings for setting up community kitchens, cultural centres, and popular schools (Carman & Yacovino, 2007). These events occurred in the heat of the cycle of social mobilisation that characterised the country at the turn of the century. The case studies I analyse represent a renewed version of this phenomenon of "space recovering", where the main subjectivity at play is not the neighbour but the worker and producer, and part of the broader popular economy movement.

In the Buenos Aires case, participants define this place as a 'productive hub' (*polo productivo*). In line with the popular economy workers' subjectivity of being the 'inventors of their own job' (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014), they highlight how they have generated wealth where there was none:

> In our place, we took a vacant lot and turned it into a place that has a social purpose and a productive purpose. In a land that was abandoned, today we produce food. This generates wealth for families. (…) Where this economic model of discarding discards, we create value (Interview with Matías, worker, Buenos Aires, 30/06/22).

The land workers' activity is here paralleled to the waste pickers' work of recovering an element that was discarded and recycling it. Waste pickers are also workers of the popular economy sector, and their organisation is often mentioned as a paradigmatic example of the movement. Matías, the interviewee, says that like waste pickers, who recover cardboard that is thrown away and then generate the paper that we use to write, here workers are also

showing how to recover a ‘discarded’ land and turning it into a productive and popular one. It can also be shown how both waste pickers and agroecological gardeners are ‘inventing their own job’ in combination with socio-environmental aims. They recover and recycle materials, and contribute with environmental regeneration.

Workers in Buenos Aires mention that when the labour movement started working in the site, at the end of 2015, the situation was chaotic. As part of the national Ministry of Social Development programmes, there were some workers trying to clean up the space, but they were not organised, neither had any guidance or tools (Interview with Yamila, worker, Buenos Aires, 04/04/22) The site covers around four hectares of land. It used to be a public, state-owned, residential school for children. But around the beginning of the 2000s these programmes had been dismantled, and the site was left “abandoned”, with its buildings ended up being “vandalised” (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 25/02/22). Fifteen years later, it seemed inhabitable at first for the workers that started to organise their production there.

Gonzalo, one of the participants that was part of this first group of workers in 2015, also describes the place as in a state of abandonment. He remembers how it was overgrown with vegetation. The first task they tried to do was cutting the grass, but they did not have any machine, so they used machetes. When they finally got some lawnmowers, they did not have the resources to buy petrol, so these were still useless. It was only over time, and with the arrival of new participants and materials, that the place started to take its current form (Interview with Gonzalo, worker, Buenos Aires, 18/03/22).

The decision to prioritise the food garden and plant nursery projects was something that participants in Buenos Aires decided in consideration of their material possibilities and constraints. In a context of resource scarcity, anything they planned needed to be effective. “The place is huge, the investment there is huge, we didn’t have enough, the *pesos*[39] we had to invest had to be effective”, says Matías, one of the organisers (Interview with Matías, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/04/22). They sought a project that the workers could hope to

[39] Name of Argentinian currency.

see materialised in a short period of time. That is, an idea brought into practice that could give them a sense of "victory", a motivation to continue. Their reasoning was that even in the worst-case scenario, with a food garden, they could at least eat the produce:

> It is an activity whose process is visible, a valorisation, a self-valorisation of our subject, of our bases, of seeing the seed, then seeing the plant, then seeing the fruit, and that we were able to make, and that we were able to sell, that was great for us. It would have been different with other processes that would have taken longer. It was a matter of having a quick victory. And each harvest, for us, was a victory (Interview with Matías, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/04/22).

These 'victories', defined as achievements in the process of building a material space for working and seeing the results of their labour, are associated with the construction of the workers' subjectivity:

> It is very much a question of self-esteem. It's generating labour, finishing, and giving value to that process of production, of construction. It is about raising a wall, finishing it, and watching that it's there, standing still. That's when the *compañeros*... when they have working clothes, when there are routines, roles, when there are meeting places and we all have the same reality, and we come from the same place, that generates the workers' identity (Interview with Matías, worker, Buenos Aires, 30/06/22).

The organisation of the first group of workers in Buenos Aires happened in a context of electoral change, with a new governmental coalition in December 2015 starting their terms in the national and provincial level. As the workers were beneficiaries of conditional cash transfer programmes run by the national government, they feared the discontinuation and loss of income with the centre-right coalition *Cambiemos* led by President Mauricio Macri coming into power. But this perceived adversity was also understood by the movements as a context of possibility for strengthening the unionisation between the workers at the site. Thus, this represented an opportunity for the workers to organise and start rebuilding the space, so they could have their 'productive hub'. In fact, prior to 2015, the regulations for participation in social programmes did not allow them to directly organise their work and administrate their tools and materials (Longa, 2019b, p. 116). That was not a prerogative of the movements. But in the new

context, they could directly manage the workplace, which gave them more autonomy to decide.

In Entre Ríos, participants also remember how damaged and dilapidated the space was when they first started to work in their rebuilding back in 2017. Before 2017, the site used to be concessioned to a private agrotechnical school as well as to the city racing circuit. These were activities that did not consider their environmental impact to the soil and the well-being of the fauna and flora of the site. Particularly, the racing circuit was impacting negatively in the area, due to the elevated noise level. After the concessions for these activities ended, the municipality recovered the full possession and use of the space. They remember having found the soil in a degraded condition. There were fallen trees, scattered throughout the site (Interview with Felipe, government official, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22; Interview with Nacho, worker, Entre Ríos, 16/12/22). “All the buildings, the facilities, were deteriorated, there wasn't even a single tool, it was all in ruins actually” (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22).

The area for production is called *colonia* by the participants, to distinguish it from the area destined to the environmental reserve. This *colonia* area covers sixty hectares of land. Now they transformed the space and carry out multiple productive activities. For instance, there is an area for vegetable production, where two UTT participants work, another for cow grazing, and a mobile poultry house for free range hen farming. But in order to achieve these activities, participants remember they needed to undertake

> a lot of work that you can't see but which makes things work now. (…) It means digging a trench, laying a pipe, bringing in electricity, bringing in things that (…) are very necessary. And at the same time, there was also the improvement on grazing, watering spots, drinking water for the animals, well, all those things. All around here there were eucalyptus trees, trunks, they had been pruned at some time and there were burnt eucalyptus trunks, well, we removed all of that, we did, we tidied all that up (…). Tidying up, cleaning, selecting, removing the vegetation that could damage the buildings, well, everything that compromised the buildings, we also removed it (…) it was an abandoned place, and we had to start bringing it back to life. So, well, imagine that: coming to a place that had been abandoned for many, many years, thirty years, twenty years or so, and starting to make it work (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 02/12/22).

With the impulse given from the municipality's Plan, the site was recovered from a state of "oblivion" and "abandonment" and converted into a nature reserve and *colonia* for agroecological production, participants say (Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 07/05/22). Having a vacant land, available for use, municipally owned, after the concession contracts ended, was seen as an opportunity to create this alternative project that combines productive and environmental aims. Participants indicate that this opened up a window of opportunity, in a context where other kinds of deprivatisation processes, such as disputing the ownership of large landowners, is beyond the realm of legal action for the municipal state (Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 23/02/22).

Legal-administrative constraints to municipal action constitute a limit for remunicipalisation processes, as several competences are allocated to provincial and national agencies but not the municipal (Janoschka & Mota, 2020). Argentina is not an exception. Broadly speaking, the situation of local governments in the country is one of reduced autonomy. Despite Argentina being a federal republic, it has a strong centralist political tradition. Municipalities are generally understood as appendices of other levels of government (Cravacuore, 2009), something that participants in this case study actively dispute, promoting a municipalist perspective.

Thus, the availability of municipally owned land was perceived as a possibility to start a productive *colonia*, where they could show that agroecology was viable. This occurred in a context where the municipal government needed to show to the public opinion that alternative methods of production were feasible, after prohibiting the use of glyphosate. There was, as participants indicate, a "political decision of saying 'we are not going to stay with the mere prohibition, we have a way out. There is a possible, tangible, real, concrete way out that we can practice, and it's agroecology'" (Interview with Damián, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 13/07/22).

Considering how this initiative emerged, this case located in the Entre Ríos province might be defined as a remunicipalisation. However, it has some particularities regarding other kinds of remunicipalisation identified in the literature. Generally, the concept of remunicipalisation is better equipped to

describe experiences in which the municipal state, sometimes along with citizens' associations, regains ownership of a public utility company after a period of privatisation (Baker, 2004; Becker et al., 2015; Clifton et al., 2019; Cumbers & Paul, 2022; McDonald, 2018; Warner & Aldag, 2019). But deprivatisations can exist beyond this company-based model.

I propose to understand this phenomenon spatially, observing the deprivatisation of concrete spaces. That is, not limiting the concept to a legal-administrative framework, when formally constituted companies change its legal status. With this spatial perspective I suggest, alternative experiences such as the Entre Ríos one can be identified as part of the broader phenomenon of deprivatisation, understanding that it can take multiple forms in different contexts.

With this spatial perspective in mind, then, how can the phenomenon of deprivatisation be understood when compared to the case of Buenos Aires? There, the site has not reverted to municipal state ownership after a period of private concession, as in the Entre Ríos case. Yet the issue of privatisation is also part of the conversation there. As indicated in Chapter 4, participants fear that the site where the workplace is located could be privatised in the future, and they could potentially be evicted from it. This is due to the generally distant role that the municipal government has displayed regarding the labour movements. This is also because of the local government having promoted concessions of public land to private entities, such as to a rugby club. Participants believe that if it were up to the municipality, it would not be a public place, but would be sold to private developers, or, at best, become a generic park with no ecosystemic or social services.

Participants also consider that if it were not for their collective action, the space would remain

> like it was before. An abandoned place, on the brink of destruction of all the historical heritage that is here. Waiting for the real estate business of the wealthiest. A land of nobody, let's say. Because that was the history of the whole site. It was abandoned for almost twenty years. And nobody did anything, and they stole and broke everything too. Then, we managed to build a productive hub on the site (…). That is no small thing (Interview with Luciano, worker, Buenos Aires, 15/07/22).

In this situation, the fear of participants intensifies, as their efforts to rebuild the site could have potentially made it more appealing for its privatisation. Participatory efforts in this kind of urban agriculture initiatives, which revitalise neglected sites located in post-industrial cities, can inadvertently end up supporting private development interests, setting the state for gentrification processes and cycles of capital accumulation (Cumbers et al., 2018). Participants are acting in an unstable context, knowing how difficult it is to resist and contest these tendencies as a popular economy initiative. Privatisation is an ever-present threat for their actions.

In light of the situation in both case studies, I observe that the issue of privatisation appears in two different ways. A relational definition of space looks to the way in which actors symbolise spatialities in relation to their experiences and perceptions of time (Harvey, 2012). Thus, the temporal dimension is also a factor to consider in the analysis of spaces.

Following this, on the one hand, in the Entre Ríos case, privatisation emerges as a subject of discussion to describe a past moment in time, when the private school and the racing circuit were in possession of the space. The current initiative by the municipality and the UTT is presented as a contrast to that situation of public resource degradation, shown by the images of soil erosion and falling trees that participants evoke. On the other hand, in the Buenos Aires case, privatisation appears as a future dystopia, where all the work of recovery and building of a productive workplace for the popular economy would disappear for the interest of a few. Hence, I suggest analysing the building of public alternatives as opposed to privatisation tendences in broader temporal terms. A public alternative can be contrasted to a past situation of privatisation, as well as to a possible future privatisation.

So far in this section I have introduced how participants in the initiatives emphasise how the places were transformed since their arrival. This transformation is presented by them as the result of their own work and effort to convert these spaces into productive workplaces. They contrast their current state, which they present in a positive light, with a past which is presented negatively, as abandoned, discarded, neglected, ruined, or simply destined for private uses that disregard broader values such as the environmental ones. In

both cases participation, then, is signified to have a protective characteristic against privatisation. It is the active involvement of participants that allows the transformation of spaces from degradation and abandonment to productive areas.

There is then, a transformation of formerly abandoned or dilapidated public spaces into a new form of publicness: a plural one. These workplaces are the product of the organisational processes of the actors who come together to form collectives and undertake their practices in these spaces, as described in Chapter 4. This mosaic of actors establish relationships of cooperation to build these spaces, hence these are "relational spaces" (Harvey, 2012): their functioning could not be understood without considering how participants envision the sites and reflect on their collective practices of transformation during time. Participants cooperate to create a particular spatiality. These are workplaces, spaces that they envision for both productive and socio-environmental purposes, without thinking of these two terms as opposites but as complementary.

In the following subsections, I describe how participants signify the processes of rebuilding and transforming the space considering three aspects. First, how participants reconstruct the materiality of the places, for making them workplaces. This is not an easy task, as material resources are scarce in the context of popular economy initiatives. Second, informed by the agroecological perspective, they promote an understanding of productive processes as co-occurring with the regeneration of the environment and general socio-environmental well-being. This way of understanding production is specific to these kinds of initiatives emerging in opposition to the extractivist paradigm. Third, in line with the agroecological approach, participants seek to build a workplace that promotes the well-being of those who work there or come to visit. This well-being is associated with a feeling of connectedness with nature as a right for the people.

6.2.1 Building materiality from scraps

Having proper material conditions of production is crucial for these initiatives to become workplaces. Most of the work that is carried out there has to do with

bringing into operation this materiality. This material dimension was not something preexisting. As participants explain, it is the product of their own participation: their labour into repairing, cleaning, getting resources, and getting creative with what they aim to do and what they actually have and could realistically achieve. Workers' labour into reimagining materiality and bringing it into reality is what makes these initiatives possible.

Participants give accounts of the actions that transformed the space. These transformations leave "observable traces", proofs of their agency (Latour, 2005, p. 53). In this subsection I describe how participants refer to these transformations by mentioning these 'traces', material elements that they point out to indicate their achievements. These 'traces' represent the crystallisation of the relations between the plural mosaic of actors and their efforts to build up a durable workplace. This materiality is built from scraps, a metaphor that I use to symbolise the state in which they describe the dilapidated condition in which they found the sites. The idea of scraps also refers to the materials they find, rebuild, reuse, repair, borrow, or get via public programmes to produce their desired workplaces in a context of socio-economic scarcity.

One of the main concerns for participants in the Entre Ríos case, back in 2017 when the project started, was the lack of proper spaces for workers to live in the *colonia*, have a break, prepare some food, and get some shelter. They remember having to stay in tents when they first arrived, without proper means to be warm during wintertime. They needed a decent, functioning space that could cover these needs, install basic services and refurbish the premises. Then, in 2022, I could see that two of the workers were living permanently in the *colonia*, and the rest also frequently spend overnight there as part of their working shifts. Emilio says proudly how despite in the beginning "everything was dilapidated", "today there is a lot of space where you can live and be well, that is, there is water, there is electricity, the walls are painted, the ceilings are clean" (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22). The place was like "a seed in a state of latency" that they were able to "germinate, activate, wake it up" with their labour (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 02/12/22).

Similarly to the case of Entre Ríos, participants in the Buenos Aires case were not only concentrated in setting the land plots for production. They conceived of

the space in a more comprehensive way. Using their words, they wanted a place that could 'dignify' the lives of workers. They rebuilt the structure of one of the buildings that was in ruins, and there, they set up a kitchen space where workers can eat every day, similar to how factories have a common canteen. They also built there an educational area, with a programme for completion of primary school studies, and a library. Additionally, in another building that they refurbished, they created an early childhood learning and care centre. In particular, this was designed by having into consideration the practical needs of working mothers. In this way, "they can come [with their children] and be at ease during working hours" (Interview with Yamila, worker, Buenos Aires, 04/04/22).

The need to provide basic conditions of safety and accessibility for both workers and the general public was identified by participants as a challenge from the start. For instance, in Buenos Aires, originally the place was considered unsafe because the ground was eroded and uneven. People could easily fall while walking. There were many loose parts in the wired fences as well, that needed to be fixed before someone got hurt (Interview with Alejandro, worker, Buenos Aires, 01/04/22). In the Entre Ríos case, workers also remember their efforts of retracing the existing paths that were overgrown and created some new ones in the nature reserve area. They also arranged a reception area and designed signs for visitors, with maps of the paths as well as indications of which function each building has (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22).

There is also a huge work shed where they have built a biofactory, a place where workers produce their own biofertilisers to use in their agroecological work, to avoid the use of agrotoxics. These biofertilisers are also shared with other agroecological producers in the region as part of the Plan for Healthy, Safe and Sovereign Food. Emilio remembers that in the beginning, they "couldn't even get inside [the shed] because of all the dirt, it didn't have a door, and now it has doors, a floor, and there is a workshop and tools" (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Rios, 22/11/22). Even industrial engineering principles were considered in the design of the biofactory, considering potential physical risks for workers (Interview with Alberto, governmental officer, Entre Ríos, 30/11/22).

But all of these activities of rebuilding and transforming demand material elements. Having the required infrastructure, tools and equipment for working is something that they identify as one of the main issues in order to make progress. For them, being able to get these materials is a before and after for the projects. These are mainly provided by the municipal programme in the case of Entre Ríos, and in Buenos Aires, by funds of national government programmes, or as an investment of the cooperative of workers, bought with funds obtained after selling their plants.

Adrián in Buenos Aires characterises the transformation they observed after acquiring and installing some of these needed materials as “key moments” and “turning points” for the initiative to make the tasks more manageable. He mentions building a greenhouse, a well, and establishing a connection for watering the plants. He also remembers how happy they were when they were able to get more sophisticated tools such as a grass trimmer, pointed spade shovels, and drip irrigation tapes. Adrián believes these tools helps them move away from a “dilettante” type of work to a “more focused” dynamic (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22). These materials were an aid to speed up their working pace and become more efficient:

> We used to have one wheelbarrow, but if we were using it in the nursery [sector], the garden had to wait a bit. Maybe we only had two shovels, so it was one shovel for the garden, one for the nursery, and then waiting. Watering cans, there were only two watering cans, so it was the same thing (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22).

They indicate the relevance of getting funds from government programmes to help these projects progress:

> I can't imagine how long it would have taken to acquire everything that came in from that budget, how long it would have taken through plant sales and... so, that was a tremendous boost to the work (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22).

Additionally, workers keep on planning new material improvements for the space, like building a second greenhouse for expanding the quantity and quality of plants produced, or growing an arboretum for visitors (Interview with

Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22; Interview with Mariano, worker, Buenos Aires, 07/07/22).

However, in the cases under study, material resources are scarce. In both cases, initiatives resort to workers' creativity and hard manual labour to compensate for the lack of means that characterises the popular economy sector. They use what they have available and seek to adapt it to their actual needs.

One of the ways in which this creativity can be seen in action is in their efforts in repairing and reutilising materials. Their accounts of these practices align with De Coss-Corzo's (2021) conceptualisation of these activities as a form of creative labour. Their practices of repair and reutilisation are not just acts of maintenance, because participants adapt old objects to their current needs. Repair and reutilisation efforts require practical knowledge and embodied expertise from the workers. In turn, these efforts make public materiality in these initiatives last, survive, and adapt to new times. These practices emerge in contexts of austerity, where decaying budgets and wages, and material ruination are the norm (De Coss-Corzo, 2021). Popular economy experiences are initiatives of such kind, seen in participant's efforts to reconvert decaying sites into functioning workplaces in austere circumstances.

In Entre Ríos, Andrés remembers how, in the beginning, they had few tools at their disposal. This is similar to Gonzalo's testimony in Buenos Aires, mentioned earlier, evocating how they had to use basic machetes for grass cutting because they did not have lawnmowers. Andrés recalls that they brought some of their own tools from home, or borrowed from family members: a grass trimmer, combination pliers to fix some loose wires, and shovels for digging. At times, machines were not functioning. He remembers finding an out of order, old Fiat 400 tractor, and a bulldozer which had been sitting in the site for fifteen years. Emilio motivated the rest of group to repair the tractor and the bulldozer, rather than discarding them, making them functional again (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

Workers in Entre Ríos also built a ploughing and weeding tool, by welding different pieces of metal that they found in the old shed. When I first saw that tool, I mistakenly assumed it was an old piece of machinery. It turns out that

appearances can be deceiving, especially with my limited knowledge of land working tools. Workers designed it themselves, with the available material they were able to get. The tool has a wheel in the front, and two blades that pass in a V-shape along the paths, with two handles for manoeuvring. The wheel was originally from a toy belonging to Andrés' son, which they repurposed (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Entre Ríos, 15/12/22). The story of this ploughing and weeding tool reveals how each material element that can be found in the site has an origin and a history. Materiality is the product of past and present action. Thanks to their practices of repair, the present in the workplaces is materially formed by objects that come from the past and have recovered their practicality in a renovated setting.

The practice of reutilising materials designed for other means but adapted and reconverted to their needs is also present in the Buenos Aires case. For instance, plant nursery workers and volunteers use an old bathtub as a container to prepare the soil that they are going to use during the day for transplanting. The bathtub is located next to the working table where they pot up new plants (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Buenos Aires, 07/03/22). They also reutilise used glass jam jars to store the different types of seeds.

In the context of popular economy and agroecological initiatives, repair and reuse practices also represent an expression of participants' environmental commitment. This commitment is understood, particularly in the Buenos Aires case, as an unplanned result of their efforts in their search to build their workplaces in a context where financial resources are not abundant. According to Matías, "we practice popular economy without theorising it first, and then we realise that our jobs are friendly towards the environment, that they care for the *casa común*" (the planet that we live in) (Interview with Matías, worker, Buenos Aires, 05/04/22).

Materials used in popular economy workplaces are means of production within the reach of the working-class, either because they are inexpensive, recovered from idleness, or acquired thanks to social mobilisation (Grabois & Pérsico, 2014). However, while the efforts of workers to repair, reuse, and reconvert materials are effective, there are needs that go beyond the possibilities of repairing and reutilising. In order to increase their capacity of production, and

create prosperous agroecological workplaces, a broader public commitment and support, including state funding, is required.

6.2.2 Regenerating the environment for and while producing

Participants in both case studies highlight the notion of environmental regeneration to understand their practices. Differing from the traditional sustainability approach, which focuses on mitigating the harm caused by the excessive use of resources, environmental regeneration explores ways to actively engage with the environment (Reed, 2007). Workers learn to participate with nature emulating its own processes, "in conjunction" (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 20/11/22). Instead of "doing things to nature", workers act "as partners with" it (Reed, 2007). They reutilise natural elements and help regenerating the soil. Their production helps to regenerate the environment, and, in turn, they regenerate the environment for productive purposes.

Participants use their agroecological expertise to reconstruct the spaces. They help converting the sites in places with favourable conditions for cultivating the land. Participants reuse existing materials, natural byproducts of animal and plant lives, to repair the damaged soil. With this, they make public materiality last and adapt to the present.

This can be seen in their practices to reinvigorate soil health and fertility, which is one of the main guiding principles of agroecology (Wezel et al., 2020). In Buenos Aires, workers create compost by layering different natural substances such as wood chips, green and dry grass and leaves, vegetable scraps, or animal faeces. The decomposition of these substances generates nutrients such as nitrogen which strengthen the soil (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/07/22; Interview with Mariano, worker, Buenos Aires, 07/07/22). In the case of Entre Ríos, workers prepare biofertilisers in the biofactory space described above. They define these preparations as a method "in conjunction with nature" (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 20/11/22), making reference to how they seek to emulate the ecosystem cycles and use natural elements that they already have on the sites: grass, leaves, dung. In this sense, agroecology can also be conceived as including reuse practices.

Regenerative practices are also seen in the relevance that both initiatives give to native plants: in Entre Ríos by protecting the already existing nature reserve and in Buenos Aires by specifically producing a variety of these native plants for selling. Producing and protecting native flora enhances biodiversity overall, and in particular, helps to attract and keep alive a diversity of regional pollinators, they explain. So, native plants also affect food production in a positive way, they say, as it helps with the germination and fruit bearing processes of the food garden (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22; Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22). In addition, availability of a wider range of vegetables for human consumption is beneficial for human nutrition and health (Interview with Diego, worker, Buenos Aires, 03/08/22).

They also indicate that foresting with native plants is a strategy to combat the effects of climate change, especially in urban areas where limited green spaces create heat islands with extreme temperatures affecting the local population (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22; Interview with Ivana, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 27/07/22). Native plants also assist in addressing other consequences of climate change such as floods, by canalising the rain into groundwater flows, which are also needed for human life (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22).

There is an interrelationship between productive and ecological aims within these projects. Participants' socio-environmental commitment is expressed in combination with a productive aim, as they signify their products and their practices as aiming to environmental regeneration. Thus, these projects present an alternative to extractivist forms of economic production. Contrastingly, the extractivist framing understands land as a commodity to govern and exploit in order to maximise yields, like a lifeless resource, without acknowledging the importance of land care (Anderl, 2024).

Presenting an alternative to extractivism does not mean advocating for keeping the land unaltered. The agroecological perspective that participants in my case studies elaborate is intertwined with productive aims. They understand that economic production can grow, and more jobs can be created, while at the same time protecting and regenerating the environment. For them, it is about "protecting our common and natural goods, but also having the possibility of

producing healthy food, in harmony with nature" (Interview with Damián, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 13/07/22).

> We say: 'well, let's continue with this productive aim and show that agroecology can coexist with the native forest'. Because the hegemonic model of production is polluting: where there's production, there is nothing next to it. Here, we demonstrate that food can be produced in an agroecological way, without agrotoxics, without invading, and at the same time you can live with the native flora and fauna of the place and not harm them (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 19/04/22).

Thus, for participants in both case studies, the idea of caring for the environment can be tied to productive aims. With this in mind, they develop a particular understanding of the kind of environmental activism that they are involved into, a socio-environmental one or "environmentalism with a social perspective", where societies and the environment cannot be understood separately (Interview with Eduardo, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 29/11/22).

Participants are critical of what they perceive as Eurocentric views on environmental activism, by which environmental issues are seen as the result of an extreme consumerism culture which should be reduced. While this view is justifiable for high-income economies, the same cannot be said from Latin America's popular economies, where excessive consumption is not exactly the main issue but rather poverty and inequality (Interview with Eduardo, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 29/11/22). My case studies indicate the presence of an alternative socio-environmental perspective of economic production and development, led by the workers of the popular economy sector. These are not conservative movements that aim to "preserve" green spaces "from development" (McKay, 2011, p. 13). Rather, they creatively show a different kind of development that it not at the expense of environmental well-being.

This popular economy socio-environmentalism emerges as an approach that cares for the people that inhabit the spaces and their productive needs. It

recognises the needs of people in a given context, and seeks a "coexistence" between these needs and nature's balance[40].

> We always have to keep in mind that we are part of the environment, we are part of this ecosystem, we can't see ourselves outside but neither in the centre, yeah? We are not the most important here, we are a part of it, that's all (Interview with Nacho, worker, Entre Ríos, 16/12/22).

> Evaluate how we can coexist with everything that is around us without impacting it, and also, (…) without going back to foraging and loincloths, because otherwise new generations get scared and say 'what are we talking about? we're going back to the cart and the horse!', no (...) We can maintain a balance with nature without impacting it, to be able to continue with our development (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 02/12/22).

In turn, participants argue that their practices of environmental regeneration have benefits for everyone, the general public. It is not only for those interested in environmental causes or gardening:

> Everyone should be aware of these ecosystemic services, and even if they are not fully aware, they still benefit from them (…). We support the growth of cities, people can settle where they feel comfortable. But we must understand that a place with vegetation, a green place with vegetation according to the location where we are is the healthiest for everyone, not only for those who are fond of plants (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22).

At the same time, they argue that socio-environmental practices need to involve people. This is because "nature is not going to regenerate by itself. Humans, people, cities, and towns ourselves need to intervene for that" (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22). Thus, socio-environmental practices

[40] A parallelism can be established here with the notion of *Buen Vivir* ("living well"). This is a perspective that has extended since the mid-2000s, as a Latin American alternative to the neoliberal and extractivist mode of development. It focuses on the respect for nature and the reproduction of life rather than capital. It also seeks to articulate development objectives with ecological care (Munck, 2024). In this regard, it finds parallels with the concept of popular economy socio-environmentalism that I propose here. However, the notion of Buen Vivir is more deeply rooted in Andean countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia, and intrinsically linked to the indigenous communities (Munck, 2024). Since the cases analysed in this thesis correspond to a different geographical region, I propose to analyse them in their specificity under this notion of popular economy socio-environmentalism.

need to be public, so that to mobilise a growing number of people and generate a meaningful impact.

The popular economy socio-environmental perspective forms an idea of publicness that aims for the inclusion of people. It significantly differs from the conservationist ideal of safeguarding “pristine” spaces with minimal human intervention. This form of environmentalism does not aim for “intangible” and “intact” nature reserves, closed to the public, where only a privileged few are able to access and enjoy it. Wanting “pristine” spaces is not inclusive. Hence the need to rethink an alternative kind of environmentalism, both against extractivism and pure conservationism (Interview with Nacho, worker, Entre Ríos, 16/12/22). The alternative created by participant is this socio-environmental approach that is socially inclusive and has productive aims.

This social inclusion aim present in popular economy socio-environmentalism makes it “tangible”, as Adrián in Buenos Aires explains. He argues that by perceiving socio-environmental issues “from the bottom up”, from the everyday experience of working-class neighbourhoods, environmentalism becomes “tangible”. From the “grassroots”, they can say: “this issue is not about a small group of wealthy people whose conscience makes them feel guilty”. Their work has a potential impact on the everyday life of people, because the products of their labour can help more people to access quality food, beyond carbohydrate-based diets, or to clean polluted water courses with special plants (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22). In the same vein, it creates jobs with an environmental perspective: workers that produce plants for bioremediation, workers that teach new workers how to create a food garden in their labour union, other unions, or state institutions (Interview with Luciano, worker, Buenos Aires, 15/07/22).

Thus, the creation of socio-environmental public spaces in these initiatives is understood as inclusive of people. First, by considering their productive needs, particularly the relevance of these products for achieving a best quality of life. Second, by understanding there is a need for human active involvement for environmental regeneration.

6.2.3 Nature is for people: well-being without escaping

Literature on urban agriculture and particularly community gardens have noticed how these spaces primarily serve as areas of recreation and escape, offering a respite from daily routines and a chance to unwind in an aesthetically appealing setting (Aptekar, 2015; Filkobski et al., 2016; Hale et al., 2011; Traill, 2023). The public spaces I discuss in this thesis are not intended *per se* for recreation, but rather for working and making a living. However, participants recognise the relevance of making the site enjoyable and helping their well-being. They show that not only the wealthier have that right. But for them, the experience is entangled in their daily work routines.

Building on the idea of agroecological workplaces as meaningful work environments (Timmermann & Félix, 2015), I observe how participants seek to find joy on their daily routines. For participants in the two case studies, well-being is an experience that emerges as the result of being in an open and green space, and, at the same time, experiencing that space with working peers and building a workplace together. It is about seeing the results of their collective effort as well as having aims in common.

Andrés in Entre Ríos says the place "is my earthing cable" (*cable a tierra*), to express the idea of him being able to find balance and tranquillity through contact with the ground in nature:

> It's the place, the place itself gives it to you. Being together with nature, with my workmates, we are all there. There are only a few of us working there, but we all have the same goal. You see, we are all working towards the same horizon, and we all have the same record of saying 'well, I achieved this grain of sand'. (…) At least we try, we don't sit on the couch to complain (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 25/11/22).

Eliana in Buenos Aires recalls that upon her initial arrival at the site, she experienced a feeling of belonging and relaxation. This is connected with her feelings of finally having achieved a purpose, a moment when her aspirations and her reality match.

> For me it was like: 'this is the place'. I got relaxed in the sense that after searching so much for your purpose, your 'what for' or however

> you want to call it, [you find] a place where you feel in harmony between what you want and what you do. For me it was like, well, relaxing my head, enjoying what we were doing here. Enjoying that, for me it was something important in my life (Interview with Eliana, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/04/22)

Working in nature allows participants to have a space and time to connect with their own thoughts, and think more deeply about the meaning of life and which aims they want to achieve. The workplace can become, then, a space for reflection:

> Working here with nature and so on makes me ask myself what do I want for my life, what's going on, what do I find, in which place and why, like what am I doing here? beyond this garden, what am I doing here? what's the reason? (Interview with Mariano, worker, Buenos Aires, 07/07/22).

In addition, experiencing these sites is connected to a sense of being healthy. Using agroecological methods to work brings participants peace of mind by knowing that they are not breathing and ingesting toxic substances while working. “It is much healthier”, because by using agrotoxics, “the first person to be sprayed in every aspect is the grower, the first one to receive all the fungicides, all the pesticides and everything is the grower because they’re the ones in direct contact with the plant” (Interview with Andrés, worker, Entre Ríos, 11/11/22).

> It is not acceptable that a grower has to work with toxic substances. It is not acceptable that a grower cannot work with their family. It is not acceptable that for the productivity of the garden, the grower has to lock up their family and put on a coverall, if they can, if they can afford it. And if not, well, some decide to poison themselves and work, if they get very sick, they have to quickly go to the health centre (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22).

Besides the relevance of providing a decent space for workers, participants also contemplate ways to improve the comfort and enjoyment of visitors, as these sites are open to the public.

> It should be a place where everyone could come, that everyone could enjoy. Have a nature reserve where you can enjoy and watch all our fauna and be in contact with it. At the same time, people could sit in the park, and if at some point there could be a sort of a dining room where people could eat organic food, get some cheese, enjoy that. It

> would be something that I would love to see it happen (...), to have a place where the visitors could sit. Like us, here under the fig tree, with this fresh air (...) It would be great to know that you can come, you enjoy nature, you eat healthily, well, you get like a recharge of energy (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 02/12/22).

This is connected to their socio-environmental perspective by which nature is not supposed to be enjoyed only by a few, but have a public spirit. There, people can find joy by being in the place and be benefited by the healthy food and useful plants produced. This is perceived by the volunteers that participate in the Buenos Aires workplace, who value the opportunity of having a garden space "in the middle of the city", a place that "brings the countryside to the city" that is open for participants, "where anyone can go", "open to people coming in and learning" (Interview with Constanza, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 27/06/22). It is not only about being in nature, but being in nature in public, surrounded by other people, having a chat and laughing while working outdoors:

> For me it's a place of support, I mean you come and you're working outdoors, that's really nice. It's like there are therapeutic benefits in working with the land. Also, you're with a really nice group of people, so you can talk to them if you feel like it. Someone tells their problems or not, or you can have a laugh (Interview with Constanza, volunteer, Buenos Aires, 27/06/22).

This resonates with findings in the gardening literature, that assert that these kinds of spaces can have therapeutic qualities for participants, helping their overall health and well-being (Armstrong, 2000; Bishop & Purcell, 2013; Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010; Hale et al., 2011; Ong et al., 2019). However, in this case, as it is also a workplace, there are limits to the feeling of relaxation. It is, after all, a space for production, not to escape from responsibilities.

> It's not only a place where one comes to relax, because there's also everything that a job implies. It means seeing that work is productive, that tasks are well done, that by the end of the month there is a result that can be shared in view of what has been carried out (Interview with Adrián, worker, Buenos Aires, 08/07/22).

The possibility of enjoying and finding well-being in the spaces implies a significant amount of building labour, as described earlier in this section. Workers' efforts are necessary to ensure that these spaces are enjoyable. In this regard, Julia indicates, "it's a nice place to be, in summer it's really nice to be

in. But being there has a cost" (Interview with Julia, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/08/22) of rebuilding, repairing, and maintaining.

Up until here I have presented how the efforts to rebuilt and adapt a public materiality is connected to participants' socio-environmental commitment. This kind of popular economy socio-environmentalism focuses on the relationship between nature and societies. It argues that it is possible to regenerate the environment for and while producing, and presents a vision of nature that is inclusive of people.

6.3 The contested construction of publicness

In this section I examine how the construction of these public spaces involves a contentious aspect. The socially inclusive approach that movements develop in these spaces faces opposition from other groups in the municipal area. One of the common disputes around public spaces is related to who has the right to be there and construct them. That is, disputes about who is considered a legitimate and appropriate actor, and who is excluded, argues Mitchell (2003). The right to the city is very much a right to public space. Who has a right to the city and its public spaces and how that right is determined is a question of social justice, Mitchell asserts. But that right to the city is only proven in practice, through struggles for that right. It is not an abstract guarantee. Public spaces do not simply exist, but are socially produced through struggles for the right to be in them. Moreover, through the creation of public spaces, movements claim a public presence (Mitchell, 2003).

Different social groups assert claims over the public space. With that, they challenge the claims of others, creating spaces with overlapping meanings and instigating processes of inclusion and exclusion (Madanipour, 2010). In the cases I study, opponents to these popular economy and agroecological initiatives argue against the construction of workplaces in these sites. Some local actors try to contest the right of the labour movements to use, inhabit, and construct these spaces with their alternative forms of economic development.

Along these lines, my thesis dialogues with discussions on social inclusion and exclusion in public spaces and urban agriculture and gardening initiatives. The

literature has shown that public spaces can become unwelcoming for people with restricted economic means (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Atkinson, 2003; S. Low et al., 2005; Mitchell, 2003). It has been reported that gardening spaces have limitations for promoting the inclusion of subaltern groups, showing class divides and little ethnic diversity (Bach & McClintock, 2021; Glover, 2004; Traill, 2023). My case studies illustrate an alternative form of building publicness, particular to the popular economy groups. This form of publicness is constructed by participants according to their aims of production and socio-environmental orientation, rather than integrate them in existing predesigned spatialities. Fraser (1990) has indicated how subaltern groups within society can construct their own versions of public spaces to contest their exclusion. In the cases I present, they do so by establishing alternative public spaces in the form of workplaces, that at the same time help participants make a living as well as progressing socio-environmental aims. This is the specific form of publicness of popular economy movements.

Contentiousness in the case located in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area is structured on the basis of class interests. The municipal region where the workplace is located is characterised by high levels of socio-economic urban inequality. Many of the residents within the municipal territory are of middle or high class, with some neighbourhoods characterised by its spacious properties, private security services, trendy cafes and restaurants, and clubhouses. Conversely, some other neighbourhoods, located in the vicinity of the workplace, are typical working-class areas, with modest apartment building complexes and smaller houses. Considering this socio-geographical context, the conflict in this case study can be interpreted in terms of its class dimension, and shows that class divisions are still central for understanding urban politics in the post-industrial era (Davidson, 2013). In this line, Ezequiel, one of the participants, indicates that the creation of the workplace is showing

> realities that a large part of the population in this area is either not aware of, does not want to see, or does not want to be aware of. (…) They don't pay much attention or don't relate much to, say, the more marginalised or less privileged neighbourhoods, (…) [they] sweep the things under the carpet so as not to see them (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22).

For participants, the “ignorance” and “lack of awareness” of these wealthier residents (Interview with Ezequiel, worker, Buenos Aires, 24/06/22), and the prevalence within that population of a right-wing ideological orientation (Interview with Matías, worker, Buenos Aires, 30/06/22) makes them display an oppositional attitude regarding the popular economy workers. Besides, in contrast with the case located in the Entre Ríos province, participants in Buenos Aires do not benefit from the direct support of the local government.

Specifically, participants remember a group of neighbours questioning the uses displayed by the labour movements in the workplace. These neighbours do so under the banner of the preservation of the historical heritage which is located within the perimeter of the site. They publicly denounced that workers were using old buildings to store construction materials and transforming the original structures with their works of repair. They mentioned, as well, that they were pruning historical trees. Workers argue that they did so because it could pose a danger if these trees were to fall on someone (Interview with Alejandro, worker, Buenos Aires, 01/04/22; Interview with Julia, worker, Buenos Aires, 06/08/22).

In addition to that, participants at the workplace manifest their discontent with some people who accuse them of ‘laziness’, who question their status as legitimate workers, and suggest that the place would be better without their presence. Considering the context of enunciation of these accusations is important to understand why participants are concerned about how others perceive them. In Argentina, at least since the implementation of the first extensive conditional cash transfer state programmes in the 1990s, public opinion has been shaped by the debate about the legitimacy of these social policies. Beneficiaries of these programmes are subjected to intense moral scrutiny and judgement (Quirós, 2011; Vommaro & Quirós, 2011). It is frequent to encounter claims in the media accusing them of “laziness”, unwillingness to pursue legitimate employment, and dependence on state support. Participants contest these stigmatising allegations, and popular economy labour movements have been resolutely using the category of workers to define themselves, in contrast to other categories such as the unemployed (Pacífico et al., 2022).

As a result of this concern, participants construct the workplace as a ‘demonstrative space’. That is, an actual demonstration showcasing the viability

of a popular economy workplace. A place where they produce food with agroecological methods, open to all visitors who would like to observe the results as well as volunteers seeking to collaborate and learn. Demonstrating their capacity to build an operational, well-functioning workplace is seen as a way of counteracting the visions of potential detractors. By revitalising the space, they can demonstrate their working and productive commitment. These findings resonate with Pacífico, Perissinotti, and Sciortino's (2022) observations in a popular economy cooperative of the building sector, where participants also become concerned for showing the proofs of their work to the public. In that case, they took pictures of the results of their labour, as a form of distancing themselves from these accusations and reaffirming their subjectivity as workers. In my case study, the entire workplace site is understood as a living 'demonstration' that can be visited by the public.

In the case located in the Entre Ríos province, a group of detractors of the *colonia* and reserve initiative use a similar frame to the one in Buenos Aires: the presence of the labour movements is understood by them as a threat to the conservation of the original space. Seemingly a wider trend, in the name of environmental conservation, green spaces can be made inaccessible to the public (Certomà, 2011).

UTT workers and the municipal government plan to build new onsite housing facilities to allocate future UTT participants that they aim to include in the project. For that reason, they intend to start construction work, renovating old buildings with funds from a national government programme (Interview with Bárbara, government official, Entre Ríos, 18/04/22). But similarly to the Buenos Aires case, a group of opponents to this initiative voice objections to UTT workers living permanently onsite. During a protest, they set up a banner in the entrance to the reserve and *colonia*, manifesting their opposition to the building of these housing facilities (Participant observation notes, Workplace, Entre Ríos, 03/11/22).

They accuse the municipal government and the UTT of wanting to create a neighbourhood inside the space of a nature reserve, something that they consider goes against the criteria of environmental conservation. In response, participants indicate that there are certain rules that regulate their presence on

the *colonia* and reserve. They have a code of conduct which includes, for instance, not allowing pets, as well as the agroecological method being mandatory.

Most of the UTT workers are Bolivian migrants themselves or come from a Bolivian family. There is a significant presence of migrant workers from South America in the Argentinian popular economy contributing with their experiences and knowledge, largely due to the limitations they face to access the formal labour market. Establishing workplaces within the popular economy offers them an alternative to exploitative labour conditions (Perissinotti, 2022), something that Mateo in Entre Ríos also mentions, as described in Chapter 5.

The emergence of protests against the creation of housing facilities for UTT workers makes participants feel apprehensive, as they observe that the situation is creating a "breeding ground" for xenophobic attitudes. Some opponents to the *colonia* project believe it is not fair to build houses for families that are not locals. These xenophobic attitudes were also observed by participants in another part of the town where Bolivian migrants installed stalls for selling clothes (Interview with Alberto, government official, Entre Ríos, 30/11/22; Interview with Omar, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 07/05/22; Interview with Nacho, worker, Entre Ríos, 16/12/22; Interview with Mateo, worker, Entre Ríos, 22/11/22).

These attitudes end up being a factor of demotivation for workers at the *colonia*. They feel that these negative attitudes diminish the worth of their labour efforts. Emilio, the *colonia* foreman, says:

> I come across some of them or hear comments that hurt me, because they refer to my co-workers. I am the person in charge here, but we all work in the same way, and we are *compañeros* and we get on well together. So, why talk in this way about people who are hard workers, who come to work in the same way they did when the community was formed, the way their grandparents were received? They talk about foreigners in a derogatory way. But we are all foreigners, our grandparents were foreigners, and so on (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 02/12/22).

Emilio highlights the contradictory nature of these xenophobic attitudes. Everyone was at some point a foreigner to this community, as these opponents

are not *Chaná* people, the original native communities of this region. However, the background of the UTT workers is used by some protestors as a ground for discrimination. Emilio feels disheartened by the lack of recognition of the hard work that workers are putting into the *colonia* and reserve.

Behind the claims in favour of the conservation of the reserve that these opponents present, participants understand there is a question of economic interests. That is, a fundamental clash of politico-ideological conceptions regarding the model of development that the country needs. This is because initiatives supporting agroecology, such as this one, question the hegemonic model of agribusiness production (Interview with Eduardo, external advisor, Entre Ríos, 29/11/22). Particularly, after the ban on glyphosate was passed by the municipal council, some groups have been vocal in expressing their opposition towards the municipal government orientation.

> Some of the people, who say that they are very annoyed with the political and municipal decisions regarding the ban on glyphosate, are people who have a lot of production. This bothers them because they want to keep their business going and, well, they have interests, different interests (Interview with Emilio, worker, Entre Ríos, 02/12/22).

> Opponents often tell us: 'well, let's see what the returns are' [using agroecological methods]. What happens is that the greatest returns aren't measured in money. They're measured in the improved health of the population. Not only in the absence of illness, but in terms of daily life, energy levels, development. That's impossible to measure, how a child's growth might be affected if they have eaten healthy food, how they are going to develop. And it is not easy to say, well, 'economically it had so and so amount of revenue', 'we were able to, we had a surplus of so much money'. It is not measured in that way (Interview with Camila, government officer, Entre Ríos, 01/12/22).

Like participants in Buenos Aires, those in Entre Ríos also believe it is possible to motivate people to support the agroecological cause despite the opposition. The way of doing that is communicating their achievements, and counteracting the news that the population gets from opposing sources. They seek ways to involve the broader community, offering activities such as guided visits for schools led by Nacho, the park ranger. With these activities they aim to show the workplaces as living proof that agroecology is possible, and provoke a contagious effect on visitors.

Both case studies face conflicts regarding the right of participants to inhabit and construct the public spaces as both productive and socio-environmental settings. In both cases, groups of opponents present arguments about the need for conservation of these spaces. In Buenos Aires, the focus is on the conservation of the historical heritage, while in Entre Ríos, the emphasis is on environmental conservation. These conservationist perspectives have a different understanding of public space, compared to the ones defended by participants in my case studies. Participants of the initiatives do not seek pristine areas devoid of human presence. They advocate for the creation of socio-environmental spaces that are inclusive of people, meaning, for them, capable of generating an economic production while also regenerating the environment.

6.4 Conclusions

In this chapter I have presented the forms by which participants construct the public spaces where the initiatives are located. An important category to understand the kind of space they aim to create is the idea of production. The workplaces discussed in this thesis serve as green spaces for growing plants and fostering participation. However, they are not escapes from daily routines. Instead, these sites are integrated into the workers' everyday lives, where they make a living while also demonstrating their commitment to socio-environmental issues.

Participants combine productive, social, and environmental concerns. They implement production methods designed to regenerate the environment while acknowledging the need of creating jobs and making the economy flourish. Moreover, they revitalise old spaces, ensuring that public materiality endures and adapts to their needs. As a result, their actions highlight the protective nature of participation against the widespread privatisation processes and state retrenchment present in contemporary societies.

I view their initiatives as processes of deprivatisation, recognizing that these can take various forms in different contexts. This understanding extends beyond seeing deprivatisations by looking how formally established companies change their legal status. I propose that we consider this concept in both spatial and temporal dimensions, with reference to a past concession to privates in the

Entre Ríos case or participants expressing concerns about a potential privatisation in the future in Buenos Aires.

Participants build workplaces where they can generate wealth in areas previously disregarded and degraded. The theme of the abandonment of spaces is signified as something negative for participants, in contrast to the positive feelings that they experience when they reconverted it to fulfil a productive function. Building a proper place to work becomes crucial in the post-industrial era, of societies in crisis where workers need to 'invent' their own job.

Through practices of repair and reutilisation, workers make public materiality last and adapt to new times. This emerges in contrast to the conservationist paradigm that they oppose, as they aim to transform the spaces instead of just preserving them in time at the expense of people's presence. Also, participants explain how the production of public spaces for productive purposes not only generates material goods, but also broader elements such as environmental regeneration and human well-being.

It could be tempting to follow an imagined linear temporality of events, where participants transformed degraded spaces into newly productive and thriving workplaces. However, it is important to bear in mind that the conditions where social and popular economy develops are characterised by its uncertainty. These material economies "do not adhere to linear trajectories of progressive development towards continuous improvement and stability" (Benjamin et al., 2022, p. 349).

Furthermore, these projects are not without contention. Participants face class discrimination and xenophobic attitudes. Public spaces become sites of dispute over who is considered a legitimate actor and who is excluded from it. Through their participation, workers assert their right to shape public spaces as legitimate contributors. They develop a socio-environmental approach, emphasising that societies and the environment cannot be viewed separately. They aim to engage with a growing number of people and create a meaningful impact. This perspective differs significantly from the conservationist notion of preserving 'pristine' spaces with minimal public intervention. It represents an

alternative form of environmentalism that opposes both extractivism and pure conservationism.

Chapter 7 Conclusions

This thesis seeks to contribute to the understanding of the form of publicness that is formed in the context of popular economy and agroecological workplaces in Argentina. Grounded in the idea that publicness can take multiple and contested forms in diverse contexts, my research shows a particular instance of the construction of publicness, one of the faces of this many-sided concept. In this chapter, I reflect on the findings of this thesis to conceptualise publicness as plural with the study of spaces of the popular economy and agroecology. I focus on the themes of social inclusion, the environment, the contentious aspect of the initiatives, and the role of the state.

Following a qualitative analysis, the thesis posits that the public takes a plural modality with the participation of a mosaic of actors. They collaborate in the building of agroecological and popular economy workplaces in formerly under-utilised public spaces. My thesis also delineates how these public spaces are reconstructed by participants oriented by productive and socio-environmental aims. They build a form of publicness which specifically fosters the participation of the subordinated, who creatively propose alternatives to the contemporary global challenges of social inclusion and environmental care.

The thesis addresses two local initiatives situated in the province of Entre Ríos and the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region, from 2015, extending up to 2023. This period follows the end of the cycle of post-neoliberal or progressive governments in the Latin American region. In Argentina, this became evident towards the end of 2015 with the election of Mauricio Macri as President, who belonged to a coalition of centre-right parties. This new period opened up new possibilities for the popular economy movements that I study in this thesis. These movements gained prominence on the public agenda thanks to their protests and mobilisations in public spaces. This gave greater visibility to their disputes to obtain rights for workers of the sector, access to land for food production, and the promotion of agroecology as an alternative to the predominance of agribusiness in the country.

In recent years, and particularly since 2015, movements of the popular economy have seen a significant growth in Argentina, proposing an innovative approach to

addressing the questions of social inclusion and forms of economic production with socio-environmental aims.

First, they indicate the limits of the form of economic development that occurred during the era of post-neoliberal governments. Although these governments posed a challenge to the neoliberal paradigm of the prevailing Washington Consensus of the 1990s, they were less successful in accomplishing the full employment of the population in formal labour arrangements Employment levels grew for much of the period 2003-2015. However, the persistence of unregistered forms of work and workers without access to social security indicated the limitations of the changes during this era (Abal Medina, 2016). In response to this situation, popular economy movements propose alternative forms of economic organisation. They create their own workplaces and forms of work without employers to ensure the reproduction of their lives. At the same time, they demand state recognition of their status as workers in a new economic sector, the popular economy.

Second, these movements also reveal the limitations inherent to the type of economic growth which in Argentina, as well as throughout the Latin American region, mainly follows an extractivist orientation. As Svampa (2019) argues, at the beginning of the 21st century, Latin American economies benefited from the surge of the international price of commodities, which initiated a period of economic growth. In this context, progressive governments tended to conceal debates on the damaging socio-environmental consequences of this extractive export model. The spread of soy monoculture across Argentina contributed to the deforestation of native forests and a decline in biodiversity. Agroecological activists and particularly popular economy movements supporting agroecology have shown that alternatives to this form of economic production are possible. The movements studied in this thesis seek to demonstrate with their workplaces a different form of production, which can provide food and grow native plants that contribute to environmental regeneration as well as to social inclusion.

Several authors who analyse the construction of the public and public spaces have indicated the multiple, variegated, diverse and conflictive character that they can have (Fraser, 1990; Iveson, 2007; N. Smith & Low, 2006). Understanding the context-dependent nature of the forms of publicness, in this thesis I opt for

a qualitative methodology that I call ‘situated’. This entails a way of answering the research question with reference to the context of enunciation and experience in which particular social actors are located.

As participants of the phenomenon of agroecology and popular economy in recent Argentina reclaiming disused public spaces, the form of the public to which they give rise is far from impersonal. In contrast to Madanipour (2010), who argues in favour of “impersonal” public spaces, my research shows that a situated look at them reveals the contextual particularities of their formation. The construction of the public spaces that I investigate in this thesis depends on a particular constellation of plural actors. Together, they collaborate to construct agroecological workplaces from diverse social backgrounds. These workplaces form a generative sphere of subjectivities around the role of worker and producer. They construct a form of publicness which is oriented by socio-environmental goals, within concrete spatialities.

Literature on municipalism, remunicipalisations, and urban public spaces provides insights into the relevance of local spaces as arenas of politicisation and forms of participatory agency in defence of the public. Literature on municipalism offers the framework of proximity for understanding local political dynamics (Roth et al., 2023; Russell, 2019). This underlines the situated and contextual character of participatory networks of actors seeking to create new ways of living in common. In relation to this, in this thesis I focus on these immediate networks of local actors who collaborate, in a plural way, in the formulation of agroecological workplaces. In this regard, I suggest that for analysing publicness with the lens of proximity, social research needs to be able to identify the specific actors’ subjectivities at play. Beyond the impersonal category of citizen, in this research I highlight the relevance of the categories of worker and producer that participants use to identify themselves.

These experiences promote publicness, understood as forms of participation and social engagement around resources that are collectively revalorised (Kip & van Dyk, 2024). Particularly, literature on remunicipalisations sheds light into the critical role of participation in processes of deprivatisation of public goods (Angel, 2017). This challenges the prevailing privatisation paradigm around economies at different levels and in particular the municipal level (Becker et

al., 2015; Cumbers & Paul, 2020). Based on my case studies, I propose to comprehend these deprivatisation efforts in spatial and temporal ways, both in reference to the past and to the future of spaces as perceived by participants. Participants defend the site against the possibility of future privatisation processes, and rebuild the place after its recovery from a period of private concession.

My thesis continues with the interrogation on the public in the popular economy initiated by Fernández Álvarez (2016). I agree with her findings which draw attention to the workers' resignification of public spaces as places that allow for the reproduction of their lives. This author shows that spaces such as in public transport can become a site for selling popular economy products. In this light, I show that public space can also be a place of production and socio-environmental regeneration, capable of reinvigorating soil fertility and biodiversity, and rebuild and adapt public materiality for contemporary uses.

One of the main findings of this research in relation to the meanings of publicness concerns the centrality of the notion of social inclusion, and its particular signification in the given context. Drawing on Fraser's (1990) reflections, I have indicated that some public spatialities can be oriented towards the participation of subordinated social groups. The cases I study, two agroecological workplaces, are part of this phenomenon. Central to these spaces is the participation of actors from the popular economy, who define themselves as workers and producers. The popular economy is the novel public and political form taken by the organisation of popular sectors who are excluded from the conventional labour market, and who define themselves as ‘inventors’ of their own work. The popular is here understood as a political category that identifies the excluded and subordinated in the capitalist system (Coraggio & Loritz, 2022). These are the subjects who dispute for and defend their inclusion in public spaces. They do so through the creation of public workplaces, which contribute to the creation of new models of social organisation.

In contrast to the conservationist perspectives on environmental care and green public spaces, participants in the initiatives I am researching propose an inclusive framework. They seek to care for and even restore the environmental balance, but including humans, and not in spite of them. The production they

develop in these spaces is oriented towards two aims that they do not conceive of as contradictory. This production is oriented to the satisfaction of the needs of the people, the workers. At the same time, the environment is to be restored through this same production.

Literature on public spaces gives great centrality to the notion of inclusion for conceptualising their public character. It points out how many public spaces are mainly oriented for its use by the middle classes, and end up being exclusionary for other types of users (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Atkinson, 2003; S. Low et al., 2005). The literature on community gardens has shown that this is can also be the case for these experiences (Bach & McClintock, 2021; Glover, 2004; Traill, 2023). In this line, several works have been concerned with identifying forms of inclusion of particular groups, such as people with disabilities, young people, and the elders (L'Aoustet & Griffet, 2004; Moore & Cosco, 2007; Sugiyama & Ward Thompson, 2007). My thesis seeks to contribute to this literature by indicating the specificity of social inclusion in terms of the working-class. In an effort to seriously consider the question of social inclusion in public spaces, my research shows forms of public spaces that go beyond their recreational or circulation use. These public spaces are constructed as workplaces, productive spaces for the everyday lives of participants.

Additionally, the productive and economic character of the initiatives raises questions about the type of remuneration that participants get. Some of the research on social economy emphasises the not-for-profit character that these initiatives should have (Amin, 2009; Amin et al., 2002; Quarter et al., 2009). Particularly this dimension is emphasised in experiences happening in economies of core countries, but this does not seem to be the case in other geographies (Ferguson, 2018). The findings of my research complicate the discussion further. On the one hand, participants make it clear that these initiatives are not about maximising economic profit and productivity at any cost. There are other issues that need to be prioritised, such as respecting workers' right to rest and having good quality time to spend with their families. They also point out that consumerism, taken to the extreme, is harmful from a socio-environmental perspective. That is, this cannot be their aim. However, on the other hand, these initiatives underline the relevance of getting an economic remuneration

for the workers. What form of social inclusion is possible if workers are only allowed to get the bare minimum for their survival, but no more? They aim to get a 'fair' remuneration for their products. That is, an income that would allow them to break out of their oppression and social subordination. The transition to the agroecological production model is seen by participants as a way to obtain a fairer remuneration. They reflect that this is something that they could not get by working in agribusiness, a model which subordinates them to low levels of payment and exploitative conditions. If the aim of the economy is the empowerment of its participants (Amin et al., 2002) then only seeking their survival is not coherent. In this respect, I concur with Chena (2017) that the objective of the popular economy goes beyond biological reproduction.

Associating participation with non-remunerative activities can reproduce elitist and exclusionary views of the phenomenon. Only those who have sufficient resources and time to participate in public spheres would be able to do so. My thesis shows the possibility of alternative formats of participation, which focus on economic production in combination with a socio-environmental commitment.

Another important point for understanding social inclusion in these experiences is avoiding their idealisation. For this, it should be remembered that these are experiences of the popular economy. Therefore, they have limited material resources for their realisation. The popular economy continues to be in a subordinate position in the capitalist system (Chena, 2018; Mazzeo & Stratta, 2021) and the work of popular economy participants tends to be devalued (Roig, 2017). Particularly in the cases analysed, participants face the challenge of recovering and adapting misused and abandoned public spaces, which in principle lack basic conditions of habitability. By and large, the deterioration of the spaces stems from extensive previous periods of state retrenchment, either due to the abandonment of the space in the case of Buenos Aires or to the concession to private companies in the case of Entre Ríos. Participants revitalise the spaces through creative methods of reclaiming and repairing materials with their labour and engaging with state agencies to access funding for their projects. But these efforts alone cannot counteract an unequal social structure.

Participation in these initiatives implies an involvement in the material transformation of public spaces in order to create a world in which the excluded workers could fit. These transformations allow for the recognition of their own ways of constructing the economy. Workers contribute to the construction of the material reality of the public, which is not given in advance.

An additional key aspect for understanding publicness emerges in the creative socio-environmental commitment that participants display in building these spatialities. Their initiatives to recover public spaces involve a socio-environmental commitment, seen in their productive efforts to regenerate the vitality of the land and the geographies. This is illustrated by the significance that participants give to practices such as the production of compost and biofertilisers generated from the recovery of organic materials from the same farms, the sowing of biodiverse species (against monocultures), and the production of native plants for adequate reforestation according to the geographical particularities of the bioregion where they are located. Likewise, this is seen in their practices of recovering, reusing, and repairing old and disused materials to serve new purposes in their workplaces. For example, fixing an old tractor, reusing jam jars, repurposing an obsolete bathtub, or reassembling and creating a new ploughing and weeding tool by welding and creatively adapting old tools and toys. Instead of discarding, they reutilise. These practices of environmental regeneration depend on the workers' creative efforts, made possible by their active and productive involvement within these spatialities. This is supported by the construction of the workplaces as collective spaces of knowledge learning and sharing among peers.

Remarkably, the workers also draw a parallel between their practices that avoid discarding materials and put them back into the production process, and their own situation as popular economy workers. They see how hegemonic forms of production generate an endless amount of material waste, as well as discard human lives: the workers who are excluded from the labour market, and who are deprived of land access. Against these forms of socio-environmental oppression that they identify, material and social discard, workers create a productive alternative. Participants understand that, far from being neutral,

different modes of production entail different consequences for the environment.

The literature on agroecological movements has been very clear in emphasising their political and conflictual character, particularly considering their multiplication in Latin American geographies (Altieri & Toledo, 2011; Rosset et al., 2022; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012; Tornaghi & Dehaene, 2020). Within this body of work, I observe there is a close association between agroecology and peasant and indigenous subjectivity in rural spaces. The category of peasant is the one that resonates the most when thinking about the social actors driving agroecology. This is largely due to the vitality of the international network *Vía Campesina* in globally promoting this approach (Desmarais, 2008; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010; Rosset et al., 2019). From my research in a less explored area for agroecological studies, such as the popular economy in urban and peri-urban areas, it is possible to observe that agroecology has a plural character. The agroecological framework can accommodate more forms of subjectivities, such as those of worker and producer, and adapt to diverse contexts, walking side by side with peasant-indigenous traditions in the formulation and legacy of agroecological knowledge.

In addition, this research allows for other perspectives to be included in the academic conversation on community gardens. In general, working-class participants have not been addressed as protagonists of this type of initiatives. This rather appears as something from another era (Bellows, 2004; Draus et al., 2014). However, research on agroecological and popular economy in public spaces championed by subaltern groups across Latin America can demonstrate its contemporary relevance. Participation of low-income actors in community gardens is seen as primarily motivated by economic compensations (Audate et al., 2021) or food security (Martinho da Silva et al., 2016). I have shown how this idea also applies to the cases studied, due to the productivist and social inclusion focus of these workplaces. But focusing on the economic income as the sole motivation of participants occludes the fact that workers can also be motivated by socio-environmental issues. These issues are not the monopoly of the middle classes. Initiatives such as the ones studied in this thesis show that these motivations are not mutually exclusive, but connected. The productive as

well as the socio-environmental define publicness. Hence the distance that the participants show in relation to the environmental views that they identify as Eurocentric, views that see a contradiction between the increase in production and consumption, and environmental care. Participants are concerned with transforming the form of producing, not ceasing to produce.

There is a political and contentious aspect in the construction of publicness in these initiatives. In fact, the sustained level of conflict and dissent against the consequences of the processes of neoliberalisation, driven by multiple popular movements that have characterised the country, makes Argentina a promising geography for studying the creation of forms of the public.

In the cases analysed, this contentious aspect takes shape in the expression of a dissent against agribusiness and extractivism as the hegemonic form of production and economic growth in Latin American geographies. But it is not limited to the expression of an oppositional discourse. Rather, participants express their dissent through the active construction of alternative socio-environmentally oriented forms of production, guided by the aims of social inclusion and environmental regeneration.

The right to the city is not a given abstract, but a concrete right that requires the struggle of those who have been denied access to it (Mitchell, 2003). Particularly in the cases under study, the right of popular economy workers to inhabit and work in the public spaces is opposed by some local groups. The presence of popular economy labour movements on public lands is the expression of a dispute over the right of the excluded to land access. Both the UTT and the UTEP are actively defending this right, and resisting the processes of dispossession of the popular sector workers. This is happening in a country where, historically, land redistribution policies for the benefit of workers have been scarce, and with a tendency for land control to become more concentrated (Barbetta, 2014; Cáceres, 2015; Gras & Hernández, 2014). In addition, recently, land occupation events in favour of popular sectors that denounce this inequality became resonant in the public sphere, such as in the mentioned cases of the MTE's *Proyecto Artigas* in Entre Ríos and the town of Guernica (Ferlicca & Pedro, 2024; Venturini et al., 2021) in the province of Buenos Aires. The participants in the cases I analyse show the contradiction between existing abandoned and

disused public spaces, which do not serve a public purpose, and the land workers without accessing to a place to produce. The creation of agroecological and popular workplaces in these spaces is one of the ways in which these new labour movements fight for their place in the world.

These labour movements also defend the right of the popular economy workers to be recognised in their subjectivity as workers and producers. This happens in a general context where the labour carried out by these actors tends to be underestimated and stigmatised (Pacífico et al., 2022; Quirós, 2011). These workers decide to organise themselves not as classical social movements, but social movements and labour unions (Muñoz & Villar, 2017) that struggle for their recognition as workers and producers, and propose self-managed forms of production. In the dawn of the 21st century, workers in Argentina innovated with processes of recovery of bankrupt factories (Coraggio & Arroyo, 2009; Rebón, 2005; Vieta, 2010). After this first wave of experiences, cases such as the ones shown in this thesis indicate that it is still possible to think and practice alternative formats of economic organisation beyond the employer-employee form, even in contexts with restricted access to resources. In the cases studied in this thesis, participants create new workplaces from scratch, recovering derelict public spaces. This is different to the first wave of experiences in which workers take over the capitalist workplaces that had employed them. In this sense, participants in my thesis continue and at the same time innovate in the tradition of these factory recovery experiences, creating workplaces among peers where workers can learn and share knowledge together.

Finally, I would like to resume some reflections on the role of the state in the construction of publicness. My thesis supports a revision of the conceptual coordinates for defining publicness. Publicness should be seen in broader terms than as a synonym for the state. This does not mean adopting the contrary view, of defining publicness solely as something beyond the state. An encompassing view, proposed in this thesis, is conceptualising publicness as plural and participatory (Cumbers & McMaster, 2012). In addition, publicness is not something abstract. Rather, it is defined in concrete practices, constructed by actors situated in particular socio-political and spatial contexts. In this regard, publicness is associated with the development of certain concrete

subjectivities. In the cases analysed in this thesis, with the protagonism of the workers and producers. It is also formed by the meanings given by the participants to the construction of spatialities, as I show here, as productive and socio-environmental.

Publicness emerges as plural, as the result of the combination of a mosaic of different actors. First, it can be observed in contemporary Argentina that labour movements have multiplied. There is no longer just one labour movement, but a different labour movement has emerged, representing workers of the popular economy (Abal Medina, 2016), in a global context formed of fluid and multiple forms of economic organisation (Gibson-Graham, 2008). This newer labour movement, as I show in this thesis, stands for its place in defining and constructing the public sphere. Moreover, it engages in collaborative relations with other actors in the public sphere: NGOs, environmental experts, volunteers, as well as state agencies.

The state in dialogue with the movements is of a distinct kind. Certainly, not every government is willing to actively engage with the popular economy movements: that can be seen in the case of the local government in the case located in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. The case located in Entre Ríos shows a different municipal situation.

Various analyses have identified that following the 2001 crisis in Argentina, the state has incorporated participatory principles into its management, especially at the local level (Annunziata, 2011; Arpini, 2020; Landau, 2008). This is also evident in other countries in the region, even earlier in time, such as Brazil (Goldfrank & Schrank, 2009; Wampler & Avritzer, 2004). In this thesis, from the analysis of the case in the province of Entre Ríos, it is possible to see how the governmental actors value this participatory principle. This principle is expressed, for example, in the idea of having an ‘open doors’ municipal government. At the same time, the participatory principle is here combined with the municipalist principle of defending the right to make decisions autonomously. Even if, as in this case, the public policies that they carry out are not explicitly supported by governments at the provincial or national level.

At the same time, by incorporating this participatory principle, the state recognises their currently diminished institutional capabilities to constitute itself as a privileged actor in the socio-economic sphere. This is a sign of the times. Without the support of actors beyond the state apparatus, the state is hindered in the realisation of transformative projects. In this case, the creation of productive and agroecological public spaces. In the context analysed, these restrictions on state actions are exacerbated by the conflictive nature of their municipal public policies, which are promoting alternatives to the hegemony of agribusiness and extractivism. The state is dependent on the collaboration between plural actors to create these alternatives.

Similarly, the NGOs in the Buenos Aires case do not act in isolation. They need to join the collaborative network with popular economy movements in order to gain access to a productive space. UTEP's workplace allows the NGOs to take their commitment to environmental regeneration to a greater scale. In this way, they are better positioned to have a broader social impact, as they can engage with sectors of the working class that in principle are not connected to these NGOs.

Returning to the question of the state, the movements advocate for its active role in the implementation of public policies for land access for the working class, support for the popular economy productive projects and the development of agroecological alternatives. They believe that the state should support the workers who need the most. The state is part of the plural mosaic of the public, and as part of the mosaic, it is one of the pillars that support these initiatives. This invites consideration of the possible reformulations that these projects may undergo in view of the current political context in Argentina. The new national government since December 2023, whose ideological orientation proposes the withdrawal of the state from the sphere of social rights, may influence the future of these initiatives.

Simultaneously, the drive for agroecology and popular economy is not limited to what the state can do. Far from it, the vigour of movements and networks of plural actors beyond the state is fundamental for explaining the vitality of these causes. At the same time, the state does not play the same role in the two cases analysed. The role of the municipal state in the case located in the province of Entre Ríos is key in the construction and management of the workplace. But in

the case in Buenos Aires, the labour movements decide and manage the workplace, even if they are supported by funding from national state programmes. This indicates that the state does not have the same weight as a pillar in both cases, and shows the diversity of forms that the plural mosaic framework can take in practice.

To build on the findings of this research, future studies could consider analysing the possibility that these initiatives have for expanding to different locations and contexts. The literature on both municipalism and agroecological movements stresses the value of establishing networks to avoid falling into the local trap (Purcell, 2006). Agroecology studies mention two types of expansion strategies, “up-scaling” and “out-scaling” (Altieri & Nicholls, 2008; Bernal et al., 2023). Analyses on municipalism also emphasise the development of a federal network of cities to support new political forms based on proximity and autonomy (Roth et al., 2023). In this thesis, I have mentioned the existence of UTT's Co.Te.Po. as a peer-to-peer agroecological knowledge network, established by the land workers themselves, to share knowledge across the country. Following the role of the supporting environmental experts beyond the city in the Entre Ríos case can also indicate links to further experiences. I have also pointed out the existence of RENAMA, the network of municipalities and local communities in support of agroecology, which seeks to strengthen and expand these initiatives. There are also other networks that participants rely on, such as those dedicated to native plants, community gardens, and those linked to the supporting NGOs. Further studies that could broaden the analysis of these networks would allow us to address the possibility of expansion that these popular and agroecological economy initiatives have, particularly for the recovery of public spaces.

Another promising line of research for expanding on this thesis would be a comparison of these forms of creating publicness with other types of participatory initiatives at the local level. Drawing on the conceptual tools developed here, the similarities and differences in the creation of publicness could be addressed in a comparative way. This line of research could raise questions such as: what other forms of publicness can we find at the local level? Do these initiatives also include the participation of a plurality of actors? What kind of actors participate, and which influence they have? Are there other forms

of actors' subjectivity? To what extent do they differ from the subjectivity of workers and producers? What meaning do actors give to their participation? Do these initiatives contribute to the construction of spatialities? Are these spatialities with a productive orientation? Are socio-environmental causes also present in these other participatory initiatives?

A comparison could be made between the findings of the present thesis and my previous doctoral research on participatory budgeting initiatives at the municipal level in Argentina (Arpini, 2020). In the latter, the weight of the local state in the definition of participatory formats and decisions is greater than in the cases analysed in this thesis. These budgeting initiatives are much closer to the top-down point of the continuum that I propose in Chapter 4. Participation there is much less stable, and participants' levels of commitment are generally lower, as this is not their job. Moreover, social movements are not often found in participatory budgeting meetings. People tend to participate as individuals, and the dominant subjectivity is that of the neighbour (*vecino*). In addition, participation does not usually exhibit contentious discourses, or debates about models of economic development and social wellbeing in Argentina and the world, as in the cases analysed in this thesis. When more contentious debates surfaced in the participatory budgeting meetings I attended, government officials often redirected the discussion back to less conflicting topics. That is far from the case with the popular economy and agroecological initiatives, which are in itself contentious topics in the public discussion.

I believe that the conceptual approach developed in this thesis can be useful as a foundation for future research interested in the forms of creation of publicness in a plural and participatory sense. This research aims to contribute to a dialogue on publicness in the local space that is already underway in social research. This is the case, for example, in studies on municipalism, remunicipalisation, and local public spaces, which were fundamental for structuring my theoretical framework. My study also seeks to reposition the question of the public in research on agroecology and social and popular economy. Although studies on popular economy are highly developed in Argentina, reflections on the constructions of publicness are still scarce.

We live in an era where the debate on the public and its tensions with the private is widespread, in view of the growing polarisation of the political discussion, and the challenges posed to democratic regimes. In this context, I believe that social sciences should be able to add complexity to that debate, for instance, by showing how constructions of publicness today differ from the notions that prevailed in the last century. The transformations of publicness show us new paths, created by current participants, that seek to respond to the political, social and environmental challenges of our time.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

Case	Name	Role	Organisation
Buenos Aires	Adrián	Worker	MTE
	Alejandro	Worker	Movimiento Evita
	Andrea	Volunteer	-
	Constanza	Volunteer	-
	Diego	Worker	MTE
	Eliana	Worker	MTE
	Emiliano	Trainer	NGO *Semillas*
	Ezequiel	Worker	MTE
	Gabriela	Worker	MTE
	Gonzalo	Worker	Movimiento Evita
	Ivana	Volunteer	-
	Julia	Worker - Coordinator	MTE
	Lucía	Worker	MTE
	Luciano	Worker - Coordinator	MTE
	Mariano	Worker	MTE
	Matías	Worker - Coordinator	Movimiento Evita
	Micaela	Worker	Movimiento Evita
	Santiago	Trainer	NGO *Creciendo*
	Tatiana	Trainer	NGO *Semillas*
	Yamila	Worker - Coordinator	Movimiento Evita
Entre Ríos	Alberto	Government official	Municipality
	Andrés	Worker	UTT
	Bárbara	Government official	Municipality
	Camila	Government official	Municipality
	Damián	External advisor	Various
	Eduardo	External advisor	Various
	Emilio	Worker - Coordinator	Municipality
	Felipe	Government official	Municipality
	Mateo	Worker	UTT
	Nacho	Worker	Municipality
	Omar	External advisor	Various
	Rocío	Worker	UTT

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Invitation to take part in a project

Hi! My name is Emilia Arpini and I am doing a Social Sciences research project for my doctoral thesis about public initiatives.

I would like to know more about …… (*case where the participant is involved in*)

I would like to ask you some questions about this experience if you agree. We can have a chat through Zoom or WhatsApp, or meet in …….. (*public place*).

I would really appreciate your participation. You do not need to answer all questions, just the ones that you want to.

I would like to record our conversation so I can remember what we talked about. I will send you a copy of the transcript so you can correct or delete information if you want. I will save this information in secure storage.

The interview will remain anonymous and confidential. I will not use your real name, but a pseudonym. Confidentiality will be respected subject to legal constraints and professional guidelines.

If you would like to talk to me you can call or text me on …….. (*number*).

You can also get more information about this research on this webpage: www.iniciativaspublicas.com. My email is: e.arpini.1@research.gla.ac.uk and my supervisor's: mo.hume@glasgow.ac.uk. Once the research is finished you will find through the website links to publications with results and an open access research database.

You can pursue a complaint through the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston: muir.houston@glasgow.ac.uk

Thank you.

Appendix C: Consent Form

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Project: Building Public Ownership. State, Activism and Participation at the Local Level in Argentina

I confirm that I have been invited to participate in this study and have had the opportunity to ask questions about it.

My participation is entirely voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

- I agree / do not agree (*delete as applicable*) to interviews being audio-recorded.

- Data from interviews will be used in research publications. My real name and personal information will/will not (*delete as applicable*) appear there.

- Parts of transcripts that do not contain personal information will/will not (*delete as applicable*) be shared for use in future academic research in: www.researchdata.gla.ac.uk

- The rest of the material will be destroyed once the project is complete. I can request a copy of the audio and transcript.

I agree to take part in this study.

OPTIONAL (participant can choose verbal consent instead):

Participant

Signature: .....

Name: .....

Date: .....

Researcher

Signature: .....

Name: Emilia Arpini

Date: .....