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### 'We could be rich'

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# **‘We Could be Rich’: Unemployment, Roadblocks and the Rhythms of Hydrocarbon Work among the Guaraní of the Argentine Chaco**

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This article explores how indigenous Guaraní settlements in the Argentine Chaco engage with the oil and gas industry. In response to the hydrocarbon sector’s shifting and inconstant dynamics, unemployed Guaraní populations have found innovative ways to make claims and mobilise for employment. In doing so, the article draws attention to the temporality of extraction and to the accompanying rhythms of flexible employment. These temporalities intersect with the localised histories of oil and gas production in ways that augment contemporary experiences of marginality. While emphasising the perspectives of mobilised Guaraní populations, the article also describes the political difficulties that confront precarious labour forces and extends the concept of precarity to highlight continuities between the impermanence of employment and the instability of mobilisation.

Key words. Precarity, oil and gas, politics, labour, Argentina, indigenous populations.

A couple of kilometres outside the border town of Tartagal in northwest Argentina, burning tyres intensified the sun’s heat. Tree trunks and branches were strewn across the highway and, behind them, a petrol tanker - its doors flung open and no driver in sight - was parked haphazardly across the highway’s two lanes. Between the tanker and the barricade, stood a group of about twenty masked men, a handful of Molotov cocktails at their feet. Silent and threatening, they waited for negotiators to appear.

I had been travelling into town on a public bus, but, now that our progress was impeded, my fellow passengers and I exited the vehicle and walked across the blockade to where a new, empty, bus waited to take us to the terminal. Behind us, a line of vehicles began to form. Some drivers honked their horns

angrily; others stuck their heads out of their car windows and shouted, ‘Lazy bastards! Get to work!’ In the distance, the sirens of a gendarmerie vehicle could be heard approaching.

The men who participated in this roadblock were members of what they themselves called a *Centro de Desocupados* or Unemployed Workers Centre. Despite the official sounding name, the Centre was little more than a voluntary, informal group of adult men who lived in an indigenous Guaraní settlement that was located at the side of the highway leading into Tartagal. Through this disruptive roadblock the *Centro* members hoped to pressure the oil company that owned the petrol tanker into granting them a *cupo* (quota) of short-term waged jobs. Far from an isolated event, blockades of this sort had become a common occurrence in this part of Argentina’s Gran Chaco, where unemployment is rampant and temporary work the norm.

The Guaraní of the Argentine Chaco mostly descend from refugees who fled Bolivia during the Chaco War that pitted the Bolivian and Paraguayan armies against each other in the 1930s. Upon arriving in Argentina, they settled in the fertile transition between the foothills of the Andes and the Chaco’s arid plains. Today, these settlements have populations that range between roughly 200 to 2000 individuals. While 20,000 people self-identify as Guaraní in Argentina (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de la República Argentina, 2004), they remain an underrepresented minority when compared to the sizeable non-indigenous, *criollo*, populations that inhabit nearby towns like Tartagal and Aguaray (Diz, 2017).

As in much of Latin America (Millar, 2014), precarious, non-permanent, work has always been a part of Guaraní life. Up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, conditions of labour scarcity in the Gran Chaco enabled Guaraní workers to find seasonal employment in the region’s sugar cane plantations, saw mills, and haciendas. However, over the last several decades, extractive industries have become increasingly mechanised and demand for unskilled labour has declined. Saw mills have closed down, sugar cane plantations have adopted less labour-intensive technologies (Gordillo, 1995), and occasional construction jobs materialise infrequently. To make matters worse, the lack of infrastructure or market access renders autonomous agriculture risky and unprofitable. Under such conditions, people’s livelihoods are often secured through an assortment of temporary jobs as well as through the collection of state-distributed welfare payments (Diz, 2018).

Though jobs are sought after in general, it is the region’s oil and gas companies that provide the most desirable and lucrative forms of employment. This was not always the case, though. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state-owned company, *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales* (YPF), monopolised production and created a strongly enfranchised labour force. However, like most indigenous populations in Argentina, the Guaraní did not enjoy opportunities to become a part of this labour force. Nonetheless, when the national government privatised YPF in the 1990s, the labour market was flexibilised, investments poured in and many Guaraní men managed to find temporary, subcontracted jobs in the oil sector. Since this peak of

employment, though, production rates have declined and opportunities for employment are now few and far between.

In line with the industry's oscillating nature, Guaraní understandings of hydrocarbon have shifted over time, from a more resigned acceptance of their marginalisation to an increasingly combative sense of injustice (e.g. Cepek, 2012b). In contrast to their past quiescence, current Guaraní demands for jobs draw on notions of abundance and compensatory justice (Rival, 2016: Chapter 8) that are ethnically inflected. Importantly, the *Centros* are not demanding that hydrocarbon extraction cease; but neither are they collaborating with corporations (Guzmán-Gallegos, 2012). Instead, Guaraní unemployed workers demand inclusion within the labour markets that oil and gas generate and, as in other parts of Latin America, they appear to recognise that extractive employment can generate resources that help them fulfil their social aspirations (e.g. High, 2015: 134). In doing so, engagements with oil and gas enable novel political forms, but they stop short of becoming channels for claims to autonomy and territory as has occurred among the Bolivian Guaraní (Anthias, 2016). Arguably, this has to do with the relative weakness of multicultural politics in Argentina, which has not enabled the growth of strong identity-based political platforms. For similar reasons, the Guaraní have not developed 'oppositional indigenous tactics' against oil interests (Sawyer, 2004: 7), nor have they established alliances with different civil society actors that could help them push back against extraction (Cepek, 2012; Li, 2015). Instead, the *Centros de Desocupados* tend to be strictly settlement-based and they react to developments in their immediate vicinity.

Given these unique characteristics, the Guaraní experience extends our understandings of how local populations remain attuned to the rhythms of extraction in contexts of labour surplus. The situation in the Argentine Chaco thus provides a unique lens through which to understand how local politics become entangled with the precarious labour regimes of contemporary extractive capitalism. I argue that the occult dimensions of hydrocarbon extraction favour a reactive form of politics that is well adapted to the episodic nature of flexibilised labour markets. Specifically, I illustrate that the erratic rhythms of employment raise awareness of historical injustices. However, I also show that these forms of politics remain uncertain and are, themselves, precarious because they fail to overcome ethnic discrimination and are unable to sustain Guaraní demands for redistribution over time. Through the focus on rhythms of employment and extraction, precarity emerges as an economic and political condition of instability and uncertainty in which sustaining livelihoods become difficult (Bear, 2014) and in which past experiences of marginality jeopardize demands for inclusion and redressal. This article therefore extends the concept of precarity to highlight continuities between the impermanence of employment and the instability of mobilisation, an observation that resonates with other cases where precarious populations across the globe struggle to mobilise along class lines (Breman, 2013).

In making this argument, I draw on seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Argentine province of Salta. Research was conducted between September 2012 and December 2013 and supplemented during two month-long visits in 2015 and 2017. During this time, I lived in a Guaraní settlement that I call Aguararenta and also frequently visited six other nearby settlements. Research was conducted within the frame of a project that sought to understand how experiences of work and patronage channelled everyday experiences of citizenship among the Guaraní. However, over the course of fieldwork, it became apparent that issues to do with unemployment were also central to the political lives of Guaraní settlements. Participant observation within households and in the social lives of young Guaraní men allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the intimate links between local politics and hydrocarbon. In-depth interviews, life histories, archival research and genealogical data collection further complemented these findings, while informal conversations with *criollo* oil workers and labour unionists also shed light on the uniqueness of Guaraní experiences within the context of the Chaco.

The next section provides a brief history of the political economy of hydrocarbon in the Chaco, before considering how Guaraní stories about the occult economy of oil reflect a history of segregation that also sheds light on quotidian understandings of labour as a mediating, redistributive act. The third and fourth sections look at how new kinds of mobilisation grew out of the distinct and unpredictable temporalities that characterise production in the oil and gas fields near Guaraní settlements. I show that these mobilisations have instilled confidence in and given a sense of purpose to those young men who hope to gain employment in the oil and gas sector. In spite of this awakening, the article ends with a consideration of how the rhythms of hydrocarbon extraction and the kinds of politics they engender create a new kind of political precarity that ultimately blunts the effectiveness of Guaraní Unemployed Workers Centres.

## **Oil in the Argentine Chaco**

Oil was first discovered in Argentina in 1907. Although the discovery took place in distant Patagonia, it soon led to what one historian describes as a nation-wide ‘oil fever’ (Solberg, 1979: 103). In the province of Salta, these early years led to tense struggles between foreign companies (primarily the US-based Standard Oil Company), provincial elites and the national government, all of which had varied interests in the region’s hydrocarbon production (Favaro and Morinelli, 1991: 85-89; Gadano, 2006: 214-224). Ultimately, and as a corollary to these struggles, YPF began production in the Chaco region in 1928 and soon became the central economic actor and employer in northern towns like General Mosconi, Tartagal and Aguaray. For the growing, non-indigenous, *criollo* population that inhabited these towns, hydrocarbon extraction proved a godsend. The oil towns of northwest Salta thrived and, with the creation of YPF,

*criollo* workers found themselves at the heart of an important nation-building project that revolved around ‘petroleum nationalism’ (Solberg, 1979; Shever, 2012).

While not bereft of internal tensions (Gadano, 2006: 548), the YPF labour force became central to the kinds of unionised mass politics that characterised the nationalistic and populist Peronist movements that emerged during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, YPF and its ‘cradle to grave enterprise welfare’ (Auyero, 2003: 42) became an example of the Argentine state’s potential and a shining symbol of sovereignty and independence (Gadano, 2006: 693). Moreover, among those fortunate enough to access these state resources, a sense of solidarity emerged and a ‘family logic’ prevailed such that workers’ descendants gained privileged access to their progenitor’s jobs and housing (see Shever, 2012). This had the effect of restricting the distribution of employment within a particular, non-indigenous, town-dwelling population that mediated access to job opportunities and its related benefits. For indigenous people like the Guaraní the doors to the oil and gas labour markets were effectively closed.

This situation was precipitously reversed in the late 1990s when, in the context of a broader structural adjustment reform package, the Argentine state privatised YPF. In the Chaco, these reforms led to mass unemployment and the *criollos* that had depended on oil and oil-related employment for decades were particularly hard hit. In the town of Tartagal, the privatisation of YPF led to the laying off of 90 percent of the company’s employees as the company sought to increase its market efficiency. Unemployment reached unprecedented levels in the region (upwards of 30 percent, when in the early 1990s it had been as low as 6 percent) and temporary contracts, rather than permanent ones, became the norm (Benclowicz, 2011). Drawing on a previous experience of political militancy and trade unionism, the *criollo* unemployed organised into what were called *piquetero* organisations that used roadblocks, *piquetes*, to protest against and make demands of the state. Over time, these organisations became increasingly institutionalised and their influence over resources and municipal level politics grew accordingly as they were re-incorporated within a new project of national politics (Rossi, 2017).

Not unexpectedly, new companies exploited the vacuum that YPF left behind. Foreign investments flooded into the region and there was a pressing need for casual labour as companies sought to find new sources of production and developed infrastructure. At the same time, oil production rose sharply. The increase in competition, investment and production transformed the oil-sector’s labour market and created opportunities for people who had not enjoyed the benefits of oil employment in the past. Specifically, the Guaraní, who had been marginalised from the sector and its attendant political mobilisation, were well placed to meet the new demand for low-skilled labour in the privatised oil sector. As a result, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, employment opportunities suddenly materialised and many Guaraní settlements enjoyed the effects of a minor oil boom. Ranging from catering work in camps to seismic exploration stints, the new jobs were neither high skilled nor permanent, but they brought about an era of

unprecedented wealth. Having not been allowed to participate in YPF's earlier bonanza, the sudden availability of post-privatisation jobs transformed the lives of many Guaraní families. Some were unexpectedly able to purchase construction materials and traded their old adobe huts for brick and mortar houses, others set up small stores. Still others managed to purchase motorcycles or even cars. The boom proved short-lived, however, and by the time I began my fieldwork in 2012 only a handful of men still worked in the sector.

These oscillating experiences of hydrocarbon have transformed Guaraní lives. As will become clear over the next few pages, the exclusion and subsequent inclusion into the oil and gas labour markets informs local understandings of ethnic hierarchies as well as fantasies of occult wealth. In the next section, I dwell upon a story that I heard during my stay in Guaraní settlements. The story captures local understandings of how wealth and ethnicity intersect, but also draws attention to the desirability and redistributive potential of labour.

## **The Owner of Petroleum**

‘We could be really rich, you know? It is full of oil in the ground.’

Vicente, an elderly man and accomplished story-teller, had found in me a willing audience. Over the course of an afternoon, he recounted the story of Ikira, a Guaraní settlement not far from his own.

The name Ikira, he told me, literally means ‘greasy or oily water’ in Guaraní (from *ĩ* –water – and *kira* – fat or grease) and is a reference to the iridescent water that is said to flow in the creek that runs near that settlement. Vicente explained that the vast amounts of underground oil caused this iridescence when it seeped up to the surface and into the stream. Many years ago, reports of this oily water reached the *ingenieros* (*criollo* engineers) of the American Standard Oil company who decided to begin extraction in the region. To do so, however, they first had to come to an agreement with a shady figure known as ‘the Owner of Petroleum’ (*el dueño del petróleo*). Initially, the Owner asked to be given ‘50 heads’ of workers to eat. The *ingenieros* acceded to the Owner’s demands and brought him 50 *aborígenes* (indigenous people). However, the Owner then raised his asking price and demanded an extra 50 workers. This time, he wanted *criollos*. Ultimately, the engineers decided that this price was too high and Standard Oil gave up its intention of extracting oil from the site. For this reason, Vicente concluded, the oil reserves in Ikira remain untapped.

Inequality runs through Vicente’s narrative: *aborígenes* appear as passively devoured fodder and are distinguished from *ingenieros* who make pacts with the Owner of Petroleum. Meanwhile *criollo* workers are ultimately deemed to be too valuable to be used as bargaining chips. The hierarchies of labour that characterised hydrocarbon for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century find expression here, captured by the apparent

dispensability of indigenous labour and the engineers' reticence to offer up their fellow *criollos*. As in other parts of Latin America where cannibalism and diabolic figures feature prominently within local representations of capitalist production (Taussig, 1980; Gordillo, 2004), Vicente's story reflects a well-documented response to capitalism and the wealth disparities it generates. In this sense, it speaks to what Jean and John Comaroff (1999) have called the 'occult economy'. As the Comaroffs point out, in places where people often catch glimpses of the wealth that others possess, and where the market's 'mysterious mechanisms' provide access to great riches, we often find a proliferation of occult images or stories that explain why it is that large numbers of people are marginalised from prosperity (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999: 284).

However, as scholars of lowland South America have noted (Fausto, 2008; Walker, 2012), Owners are not simply diabolic cannibals that lurk in dark corners of factories and refineries. In Guaraní contexts, they also appear as somewhat more benign – if potentially dangerous – figures that need to be coaxed and wooed into acts of generosity. Guaraní hunters and loggers, for instance, attempt to placate the Owner of the Forest's more violent dispositions through offerings of alcohol and coca that are parallel to the Standard Oil engineers sacrifice of workers. In doing so, they aim to convince the Owner to relinquish control of valuable timber or prey. There is, in other words, the possibility of establishing some form of relationship with Owners. While such relationships always entail risk, they also constitute avenues through which coveted resources can be acquired

Thus, although, the story of Ikira reflects a history of marginalisation, it is also expressive of a certain fascination with and desire for the wealth that other ethnic groups are able to muster. As in other contexts in which indigenous labour has been central to extraction, work, its material affordances and the kinds of consumption it permits are closely linked to Guaraní 'hierarchies of civilisation' (Gow, 1991: 108-115). As an older man once remarked while telling me the story of an uncle who had left to work on a mine: when he came back 'he had a necktie and a briefcase, like a white man.' Such stories suggest that in the Guaraní experience of segregated labour markets, work can act as a mediating form of action that enforces, but also potentially traverses ethnic hierarchies. It is through their experiences of labouring within and through such hierarchies that they are able to come into contact with the wealth of the *criollo* world.

This point is worth elaborating for it suggests an attitude towards waged labour that makes sense in the context of Guaraní historical experiences. While Marx drew attention to the discrepancy between the valuable objects produced by labour and the relative pittance labourers receives for their efforts (2010: 276), the Guaraní experience this pittance as a kind of desirable participation in the wealth of an external, *criollo*, world. Mapped onto pre-existing ethnic hierarchies, waged labour seems to hold forth the promise of recognition and worth – an opportunity to participate in circuits of abundance that have been segregated.



In this light, the figure of the Owner of Petroleum captures a sense of terror and alienation, but also an ambiguous sense of excitement at the possibility of achieving wealth and status through labour.

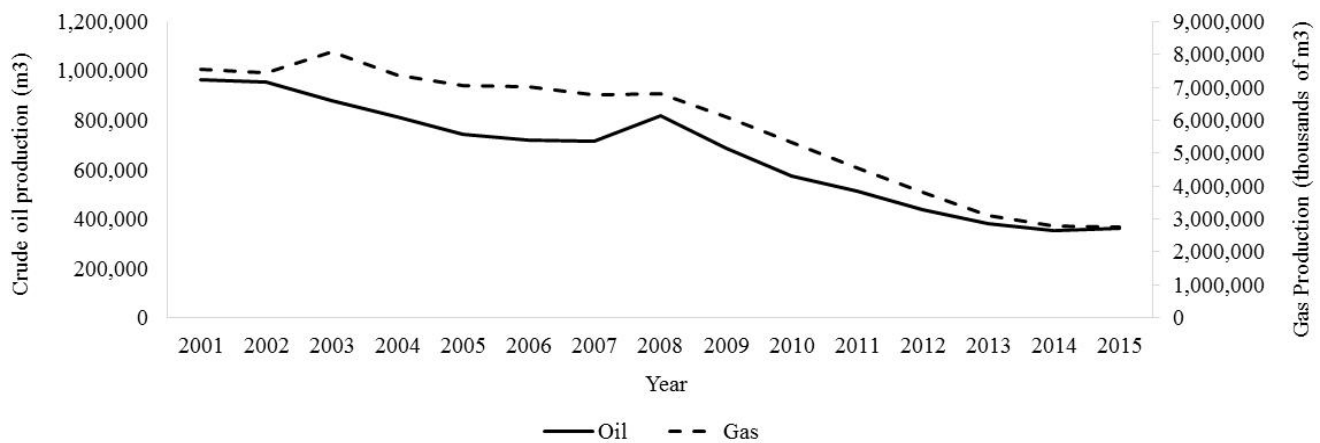
It was for this reason that the sudden opening of the hydrocarbon labour market in 1990s was such a pivotal time. In recounting their experiences of finally being hired by oil companies, Guaraní men expressed pride in the labour of clearing exploration lines through the dense forests of the Andean piedmont and told stories of the amounts of food and clothes that they were able to bring home to their relatives. ‘My husband,’ one woman reminisced, ‘was like an *empresario*, a businessman, when he brought all those goods (*mercancía*) home.’

Alas, the influx of resources soon came to an end as opportunities for employment became few and far between. Today, the extraction of hydrocarbons from what is known as Argentina’s Northwestern Basin is losing steam. But these past experiences of wealth have left their mark on the Guaraní who no longer think of themselves as passive sacrifices to the Owner of Petroleum. As I argue in the next sections, the erratic rhythms that accompany hydrocarbon extraction have been instrumental in transforming the self-image of Guaraní labourers.

### **The Rhythms of Extractive Labour**

Hydrocarbon production in the province of Salta has declined steadily over the past decade (Figure 1). The decline can be attributed, in part at least, to the natural exhaustion of the region’s reservoirs. However, it also coincides with a number of factors that pertain to the broader political economy of hydrocarbons. These include the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, the discovery in 2011 of massive shale gas reserves in Patagonia, the strengthening of protectionist policies under the presidency of Cristina Kirchner between 2007 and 2015, and, related to all of these, a decline in foreign investments.

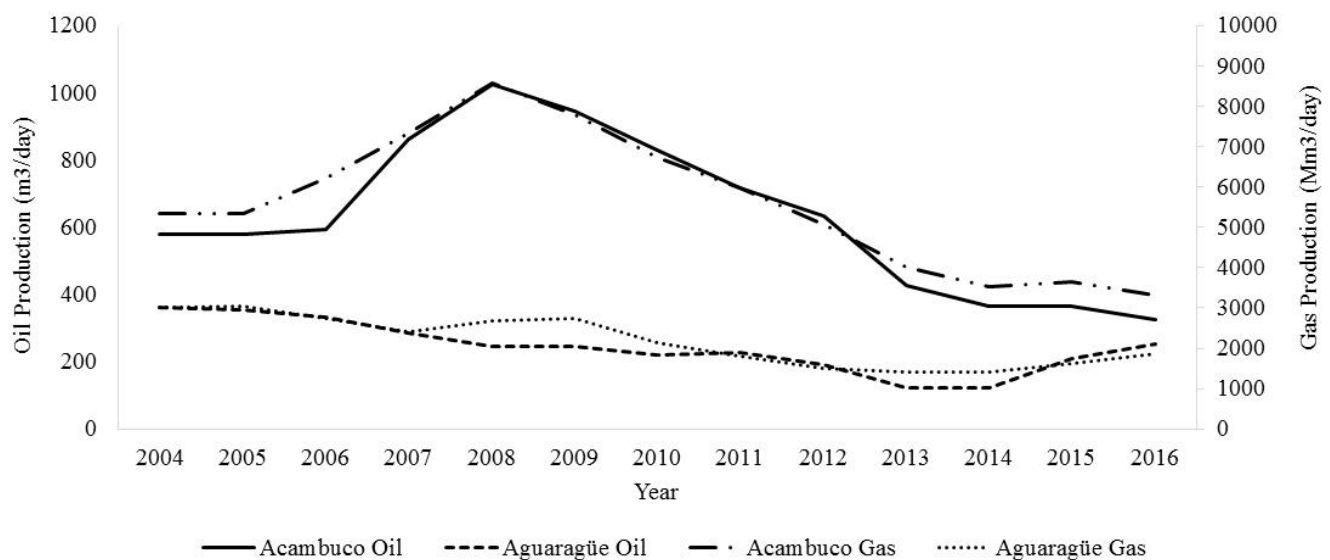
**Figure 1.** Yearly Oil and Gas Production in Salta Province (2001-2015)



Source: Elaborated with data from Enciclopedia Digital Interactiva de la Provincia de Salta [<http://www.portaldesalta.gov.ar/economia/hidrocarburos.htm>]

This macro-picture provides a starting point for understanding the factors that determine the rhythms of production in the Chaco. However, it overlooks the fact that, for local populations, small variations in particular wells can make a tremendous difference. To explore this irregularity and its social effects it is useful to consider levels of oil and gas production for two different sites that are located no more than 50 km apart. The first of these sites consists of the Aguaragüe wells that are located very near the Bolivian border and are operated by Tecpetrol – the oil subsidiary of Italian-Argentine group Techint. The second is known as the Acambuco joint venture (Union Transitoria de Empresas Acambuco or UTE Acambuco) operated by the Anglo-Argentine PanAmerican Energy (PAE), which combines Dutch, Argentine, and American capital. The Acambuco site is located in the hills between the *criollo* towns of Aguaray and Tartagal - a stretch of land that is also home to the handful of Guaraní settlements I conducted fieldwork in. Figure 2 offers a visualisation of the rhythms of extraction at both Acambuco and Aguaragüe. The data presents the average yearly production of oil and gas for both sites, which I have calculated by averaging monthly production levels for each well as reported by the Instituto Argentino del Petróleo y del Gas (Instituto Argentino del Petróleo y del Gas, n.d.). What we see is that while the decline of Tecpetrol’s production in Aguaragüe is broadly consistent with the regional trend illustrated in Figure 1, the spike in PanAmerican Energy’s production deviates from the regional tendency. This local anomaly responded to factors far beyond the control of local populations, but it marked the political life of nearby Guaraní settlements.

**Figure 2.** Average Daily Oil Production in Two Different Sites Operated by Different Companies (2004-2016)



Source: Elaborated with data from Instituto Argentino del Petróleo y del Gas  
[\[http://www.iapg.org.ar/web\\_iapg/suplemento-estadistico/boletines-2004\]](http://www.iapg.org.ar/web_iapg/suplemento-estadistico/boletines-2004)

Starting in around 2004, the Acambuco joint venture invested US\$110M to finance the drilling of a new well and the building of a 60km long pipeline that linked the well to a new gas processing plant (Rigzone, 2006). This work was followed in 2007 by the drilling of another well and the construction of access roads and culminated with a US\$65M investment in a new compressor plant to stabilise gas production. By industry standards, these investments were rather modest – however, from the perspective of the Chaco’s unemployed populations it was a momentous opportunity: the works were completed over a period of 14 months and employed a total of 1024 workers – 80 percent of whom were from the surrounding areas. The number of employees peaked towards the end of 2005 when 900 workers were contracted (Infobae, 2006) and the construction of the compressor plant employed a further 250 workers (Petrolnews, 2009).

In response to the sudden glut of jobs at the Acambuco site, various *criollo* unemployed workers congregated near the site of the planned work and blockaded the highway. This led to infighting amongst the groups (Partido Obrero, 2005) and also led to police repression and several arrests (Juárez, 2006). But it was not only the *criollos* who sought to gain from the unexpected availability of jobs. The expansion of production and employment in the Acambuco oil and gas fields also led to the mobilisation of Guaraní unemployed. Like the *criollos*, the Guaraní decided to blockade the highway and they organised politically to make demands for jobs that were not forthcoming. One person I spoke to recounted how people from the settlement stood at the side of the road counting the number of company vehicles going up to the hills. As

they counted, they also identified how many workers were being transported and calculated the ratios of ‘bosses’ and ‘helpers’ (*ayucos* or *ayudantes*). Armed with this information they estimated the size of the job that was going on and decided to block the road and demand inclusion. These blockades were successful and, of the nearly 1000 temporary positions that were created, the settlement’s Unemployed Workers Centre was granted a significant number of *cupos*. ‘It was nice in those days,’ one woman remembered, ‘the company gave 40 *cupos*, all the men would wake up at dawn in their uniforms and go to work.’

In these moments of infrastructural expansion decision-making and macro-level considerations in faraway headquarters confront the realities of an eager supply of local labour. Such episodes shed light on a labour market that is organised around conjunctures in which broader conditions – in this case, a national energy crisis, government incentives and commodity price fluctuations – attract investments that create the need for an expansion of infrastructure. This expansion in turn necessitates the temporary hiring of a flexible, low-skilled, labour force. What is notable is that, for the Guaraní, this localised experience of employment transformed the ways in which they conceived of their relationship with hydrocarbons and gave rise to an altogether new political experience. As I argue in the next section, it created a situation where people began to feel that they could confront unemployment and waiting with a time of action and mobilisation that became a productive endeavour in itself.

## **No Longer ‘Mute’**

Reflecting on the mobilisations that occurred during the expansion of works in Acambuco, the leader of a Guaraní Centre for Unemployed Workers explained the rationale behind the roadblock:

The idea [to mobilise] first came to mind (*nos vino a la cabeza*) when the [*criollo*] people of Aguaray formed as a Centre for Unemployed Workers. They demanded work from any institution, be it a company or the municipality. We participated with them for two years, but they didn’t give us work in the way that we wanted, they would just give us one job, and kept the majority. Let’s say they got 50 jobs, one or two was the maximum we would grab from that. So then, when there was a seismic job with PanAmerican, we were still mute (*mudos*) then, but we fought with the company and we said that we also had a right to have large quotas.

This leader situates the origins of the Guaraní Unemployed Workers Centre squarely within a broader, *criollo*, unemployed workers movement. The town of Aguaray that this leader mentions originated as a residential settlement for the YPF labour force that worked in nearby Campo Durán. As such, the town was particularly hard hit by the privatisation of the oil company in the 90s and saw the rise of a strong *piquetero* movement in the early 2000s. This Guaraní leader explains how people in the settlement were attracted to these organisations early on. However, he also claims that their relationship to the Aguaray *piqueteros* was short lived and that they splintered off over what they saw as a maldistribution of jobs. This first statement is important because it signals a very different reality to the one expressed in the story of Ikira. Here, *criollo* and Guaraní workers are not classed as having different worth. Instead, they have become equally deserving of the wealth that hydrocarbon companies create. Although short-lived, this past alliance indicates a mutual recognition that the challenges that flexibility and unemployment pose are not restricted to particular ethnic groups.

Related to this, the leader hints at a speechless, ‘mute’, past. The importance of speech as a technique in Guaraní politics (Hirsch and Alberico, 1996) is well documented, and the idea of ‘speechlessness’ was often invoked in day-to-day conversation among my Guaraní neighbours. Typically, describing someone as ‘mute’ implied the establishment of a hierarchical relation achieved through the skilful use of authoritative speech. For instance, when people talked about confrontations with others, they might claim that their words had left a rival ‘mute,’ or that, unable to retaliate, their rivals would just stare back blankly (*se quedó mirando*). In this leader’s account, being mute refers to the Centre’s inability to successfully confront the oil company they were demanding jobs from. In other words, the fact that they were ‘still’ speechless suggests that the Guaraní unemployed were still inexperienced in the political work of confrontation. By contrast, the creation of Guaraní Unemployed Workers Centres represented an awakening to the dynamics of the labour market.

As has been noted in other cases (Masquelier, 2013), the downtime that unemployment implies engenders political dynamics that gain salience in the face of waiting. As Sebastián Carenzo observed in an indigenous settlement near my field site, young men’s lives are ‘marked by their unremitting efforts to obtain, maintain and re-actualise their condition as temporary waged workers’ (Carenzo, 2010: 154; my translation). Indeed, the constant search for jobs has become an important aspect of everyday life. Unemployed men are attentive to what goes on in extraction sites and they react to any signs of ongoing work. They hold meetings to discuss events, schedule appointments with oil company representatives and formulate demands. At their most dramatic, they organise road blocks that punctuate the day-in, day-out grind of settlement life. The *Centros*’ mobilisations contain elements of confrontation, performance, and solidarity which make them exciting, particularly to the young men who are quick to say that they are

actively ‘pushing’ (*pechando*, literally, to push with one’s chest) for jobs. In the words of one Centre member, such mobilisation expresses the fact that ‘we native people have the capacity to work’.

As people gain a sense of how the extractive labour market works and as they become involved in the political work of organising Unemployed Workers Centres, they also begin to demonstrate a growing combativeness in the face of visible wealth disparities. In the poverty of Guaraní settlements, the arrival of the company’s shiny 4x4 vehicles or the company lawyers’ expensive clothing do not go unnoticed. Even though they might not be receiving it, it is clear to most Guaraní that wealth is, in fact, being generated and that someone is benefiting from it. As one man told me while explaining the justice of syphoning off fuel from highway paving machinery that was stationed just outside his settlement, ‘the people from the south [of Argentina] who work in the companies take advantage’ (*la gente del sur en las empresas se aprovechan*). Or, as a member of an Unemployed Workers Centre pointed out with an angry wave in the direction of a nearby refinery, ‘these people are making millions every day, how can they not even give us a few jobs?’ From a local perspective, the fact that employment was unpredictable, localised and inconstant clashed with a realisation that oil and gas companies continued to generate wealth every day. Moreover, this apparent clash proved to have a galvanising effect upon the Guaraní who had experienced the lucrative effects of occasional oil employment.

The search for employment has become a central preoccupation in local politics and the Unemployed Workers Centres are vehicles through which men counter the waiting that unemployment implies. The Centres’ claims are premised on a sense of labour’s redistributive potential as well as on a growing sense of self-assertion (‘the capacity to work’) and injustice. Contrary to the kind of passivity implied in the story of Ikira, these mobilisations represent a new kind of demand for material redistribution that also expresses ideas about the equivalence between Guaraní and *criollo* workers. This awakening suggests a transformation in the kinds of moral economy that the Guaraní relate to hydrocarbon extraction. Today, many Guaraní feel that they deserve to be hired and that through mobilisation they can redress the inequitable distribution of waged employment. As Rival (2015) recently put it with regards to the Ecuadorian Huaorani, a new ‘politics of compensation’ has come into effect. And yet, these mobilisations have struggled to accomplish their goals of securing jobs in the longer term.

## **Precarious Politics**

The boom and bust rhythms that characterise hydrocarbon extraction in the Chaco have led to a burgeoning combativeness in the face of wealth disparities. But despite the newfound assertiveness of Guaraní workers, their Unemployed Workers Centres do not represent a form of resistance to extraction. On the contrary, they constitute a willing surge in the supply of labourers that makes itself notably, if

contentiously, visible at times of infrastructural expansion. These mobilisations have taken on crucial importance in the political lives of Guaraní settlements. While they have produced a novel sense of self-worth in the face of ethnic discrimination, they have not succeeded in transforming the erratic nature of the labour market. Ultimately, the persistence of institutionalised ethnic hierarchies, as well as the temporalities of employment, undermine the success of Guaraní mobilisation and generate a precarious form of politics.

We have seen that the shared challenges of unemployment enabled momentary alliances between *criollo* and Guaraní, but that these proved short-lived. To some extent, this is because the ethnic hierarchies expressed in the story of Ikira remain in effect due to long-lasting institutional histories. For instance, labour unions like the construction workers union (Unión Obrera de la Construcción de la República Argentina or UOCRA), or the Oil and Gas Union of Salta and Jujuy negotiate and channel subcontracted oil jobs for their affiliates, but their rank and file are still primarily composed of *criollo* workers. In fact, I never met Guaraní individuals affiliated to these unions. In addition, the networks that informed the YPF labour force lingered on as many of the subcontracting companies operating in the region were set up by ex-YPF employees (see also Shever, 2012 for a similar Patagonian case) and often hired workers who were connected to these networks. This has meant that *criollo* and Guaraní workers continue to draw on segregated networks of support and compete over the same jobs. As a result, cohesive demands are rare as ethnic identities trump class-based ones (Breman, 2013: 137).

Timothy Mitchell (2009) has argued that the rise of mass politics in industrialised nations was related to the ways in which labour forces could disrupt and exert control over coal production and its infrastructure. By contrast, he notes that the material qualities of oil and the infrastructural particularities of its extraction, transportation and use requires create different kinds of political opportunities and challenges (2009: 408). In line with Mitchell's observations, the Guaraní case also illustrates an intersection of hydrocarbon production and labour configurations that gives rise to new kinds of political mobilisation on the ground. Indeed, from the vantage of a Guaraní settlement one cannot really see oil or gas. Instead, one sees the infrastructure that surrounds the extraction of these substances. A refinery, trucks, and equipment; materials and workers driving up and down the road to the wells; these are the visible traces of oil production. Such traces become particularly visible during moments of expansion, which inevitably draw the attention of the region's unemployed. In the Acambuco wells, Guaraní disruptions occurred when PanAmerican Energy decided to expand its infrastructure. This led to a movement of labour and material that was visible to the unemployed Guaraní living nearby. However, the resulting disruptions were by no means a wider, regional phenomenon. Instead, the spatially fixed (Harvey, 2003: 115) nature of oil and gas extraction meant that more proximate groups of unemployed workers could claim to be more deserving of jobs than those who live further away. In this sense, the

people that lived near Acambuco never attempted to demand jobs from the companies that operated in Aguaragüe. In fact, this was one of the arguments that the Guaraní used to prioritise their deservingness of job quotas over and above the demands made by non-indigenous *piqueteros* who had come from more distant towns.

But perhaps the biggest obstacle to the Guaraní's ability to sustain their mobilisation stems from the inconstant rhythms of employment. As described above, the labour market is episodic and unpredictable as it responds to the punctuated demand for flexible labour. At the same time, the Unemployed Workers Centres have become vehicles for an active political life that centres on the elicitation of resources from oil and gas companies. While such mobilisations confront the experiences of waiting that unemployment entails, their success rate has been far from spectacular.

Indeed, in spite of the constant search for oil jobs in my host settlement of Aguararenta, the local Centro, which was composed of about 80 individuals, only managed to receive six temporal employment positions during my initial fifteen-month stay. The real problem here was not so much that the jobs themselves were temporary, but that the Guaraní's ability to control the distribution of jobs was ineffective because they ultimately depended upon the company's willingness to distribute jobs; a willingness which, in turn, was conditioned by macro-decisions being taken in company headquarters. Building on a fetishised sense of oil wealth ('these people are making millions every day'), it increasingly became inconceivable that the *Centro* was not succeeding in gaining employment quotas. This lack of results ultimately destabilised the settlement's Unemployed Workers Centre as members accused each other of ineptitude or selfish intentions. These suspicions weakened the Centre's ability to actually muster followers. As conflicts failed to resolve themselves, people began to worry that applying pressure through roadblocks would fail and probably result in police repression.

Like the coal miners who could disrupt production and thereby engender mass political movements, temporary Guaraní workers are also disruptive, but their mobilisations cannot stop the flow of oil and gas, or the creation of wealth. In large part this is because the Guaraní are external to the companies extracting hydrocarbons, but it also has to do with the fact that they lack the historical, ethnically-inflected, ties that might enable them to leverage other forms of solidarity with employers. Attuned as they are to the particularities of precarious employment, Unemployed Workers Centres have failed in their demand for regular employment. Unlike YPF employees before privatisation, precarious Guaraní workers cannot 'plan and live a life-course' (Bear, 2014: 644) through their access to employment. Instead, the Unemployed Workers Centres have become opportunities for male groups to congregate and to act, but given the rhythms of employment that accompany hydrocarbon extraction they can rarely gain concessions from the companies that operate in the region. Unlike the coal workers that Mitchell describes, Guaraní Unemployed Workers Centres lack the capacity to interrupt the flow of extraction or to force employers to



sit at the negotiating table. While roads may be blockaded and the work of infrastructural expansion may be halted, oil and gas continue to flow.

The end result is a political precarity that is inseparable from the Guaraní's current and historical entanglements with hydrocarbon. It is an instability that results from the booms and busts that the sector has experienced and from the ways in which the Guaraní have been excluded, included, and then excluded once again from oil employment. Such long-term oscillations are compounded by the sudden and unpredictable demands for low skilled labour that a flexibilised oil market creates.

## **Conclusion**

The irregularity of extraction and the fact that extractive companies require a flexible labour market have created a political dynamic that – in its active contentiousness and explicit demand for incorporation – is unprecedented in Guaraní settlements. It has created a lived tension between the time of waiting and the time of action, both of which are related to the regional economy's extractive rhythms. But Guaraní roadblocks are less a reflection of opposition to extraction than they are attempts to deal with the uncertainties that characterise flexibilised employment and oscillating levels oil and gas production in the Chaco.

The inconstant rhythms of extraction and employment are central to why hydrocarbons remain so alluring. The privatisation of the oil and gas sector broke down the segmentation of the labour market while allowing Guaraní men to traverse ethnic hierarchies and access wealth that had previously been monopolised by *criollos*. Yet at the same time, the unpredictability of these kinds of employment and the small-scale booms and busts they generate, are also a curse for they frustrate Guaraní attempts to demand more permanent forms of inclusion. The inconstant rhythms of extraction and employment in the Chaco have driven Guaraní desire for employment and demands for equivalence, but these same rhythms also mean that the success rates of disruptive mobilisations are patchy at best.

In a context of inconstant employment, the Guaraní are only temporarily employed, but their new status as potential workers has become permanent. In these cases, the 'work' of pushing for jobs becomes a productive endeavour that seeks to materialise socially productive wealth through the active demand for employment. Ultimately, though, these times of action yield a precarious form of politics that is unsustainable due to the inconstant rhythms of employment. Like the jobs they seek to procure, the mobilization of unemployed Guaraní proves unsustainable in the long run. In the Chaco, marginalised populations like the Guaraní do not shun the presence of oil. Instead, their past exclusion combines with temporary experiences of oil wealth in ways that augment the desirability of extractive employment. Guaraní mobilisations constitute a subtle reaction to the rhythms of hydrocarbon extraction: they

demonstrate the entrancing allure of hydrocarbon wealth and are attentive to its erratic temporalities, even as they continue to draw a line between those who are and those who could be rich.

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## Figures

