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## Theological resources and the transformation of unjust structures: The case of Argentine informal economy workers

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**BATH**

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# Theological Resources and the Transformation of Unjust Structures: The Case of Argentine Informal Economy Workers

Séverine Deneulin

## Abstract

The aim of the paper is to analyse how theological resources can help inform concrete actions of marginalized groups to transform unjust structures, understood as structures which prevent people from enjoying opportunities to live flourishing human lives. Using Amartya Sen's *Idea of Justice* as conceptual frame, and the narrative of actions of the Confederation of Popular Economy Workers, the paper explores how theological resources can help mediate the social mobilization of marginalized groups to transform unjust structures and create the conditions for better lives. It focuses on two resources: religious social teachings on work, the economy and solidarity on the one hand, and ecclesiology and liturgy on the other. It discusses the role these resources have played, and are playing, in the formation of agents of social transformation, and in facilitating the voices of the excluded to be heard and listened to in political processes. It concludes by examining some challenges of theological mediation in the transformation of unjust structures.

**Keywords:** Amartya Sen, capability approach, informal economy, decent work, religion

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## 1 Introduction

Buenos Aires has long been called the 'Paris of Latin America' because of its large avenues bordered by trees, European architecture and cafés where people sit to read papers; its parks where children play and people walk their dogs; and its buzzing cultural scene. But the city has another face. The fluid automobile traffic is often slowed down by men pushing a cart full of rubbish they have collected from city bins. Sometimes their children help and sit on the top of the cart amidst the cardboard and other refuse. Someone's reading on public transport is often interrupted by vendors of all kinds making a living selling goods of all sorts to passengers. The creativity people need to produce work to survive is limitless: recycling rubbish found on the streets, cleaning windscreens of cars stopped at traffic lights, juggling to entertain drivers waiting in traffic, selling objects on pavements, using motorbikes to make deliveries, and dancing or playing music on the street. What is known in Latin America as 'popular economy' is thriving.

Popular economy refers to the production of goods and services by people who, unable to secure waged employment or regularized self-employment, nevertheless work in myriad ways in order to provide for themselves and their families. It is characterised by the means of production in the hands of the workers themselves and not investors external to the economic activity, by meeting people's needs and not maximising profit, by low capital investment and inadequate technology, by geographical concentration of its workers at the periphery of urban centres, by a lack legal recognition, labour rights, and social protection and services that are readily available to other workers.

Popular economy includes what is commonly referred to as informal economy, but can contain formal economy elements as well such as cooperatives which are legally recognized.<sup>1</sup> The dependence of popular economy workers on the formal economy is another reason why the formal/informal sector distinction is inadequate to capture the essence of the economic activities that a large number of people invent to survive. Popular economy workers often require the formal economy for some necessary components of their work. For instance, the people who live off recycling street rubbish – the *cartoneros* as they are named in Argentina – depend on companies buying their goods, such as the multinational dairy company Danone buying their plastic. Popular economy workers are also consumers of goods and step into the formal economy whenever they recharge their cell phone, buy a television set, or any good not found in unregistered shops.

Even if they work, produce goods and contribute to the country's economy, popular economy workers do remain in a situation of structural exclusion with regard to other workers. Their work is not recognized as 'work' by the state and they do not enjoy similar labour rights as public and private sector workers. Troubles occur when the carpenter falls from the roof he was mending

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of popular economy in Latin America, see Bauwens and Lemaitre (2014) and Zeeland (2014).

and breaks his leg, or when the woman selling bread on the streets has pregnancy complications and is unable to work.

There is an estimated 7.2 million informal sector workers in Argentina, or about 46.8% of the working population (ILO 2014).<sup>2</sup> Of these, the Confederation of Popular Economy Workers (CTEP in its Spanish acronyms) estimates that only approximately 20,000 workers, or about 0.3%, have acquired labour rights so far (such as health insurance, pension and protection against labour accidents).<sup>3</sup> Without their work connected to a stable income which allows them and their families to live decently, to access health insurance, pension security, and other socio-economic rights, informal economy workers are amongst the country's most marginalized groups, with many living in the urban peripheries characterised by poor public infrastructure, low levels of state and public services penetration and illegality. More than 75% of the population who live in Buenos Aires' shanty towns work in the informal economy in order to survive (Suárez et al. 2014).

Popular economy workers have started to mobilize to change this states of affairs. In December 2011, the Confederation of Popular Economy Workers was formed. Its aim is to transform popular economy work from informal, infra-productive and subsistence work to dignified, formal and productive work, so as 'to enable workers to enjoy the possibility of developing themselves as persons, creating, loving, playing, taking leisure, sharing with family and friends, enjoying art and culture, doing sport, discovering the world'.<sup>4</sup>

Using the conceptual framework of Sen's *Idea of Justice* and the case of Argentine popular economy workers, the aim of the paper is to analyse how theological resources can help inform actions of marginalized groups to transform the unjust economic, social and political structures which prevent them from accessing opportunities to develop their lives and that of their families. Theological resources are broadly conceived as texts produced by a religious institution which are used to inform the actions of its members (Devine, Brown and Deneulin, 2015). The paper is structured as follows.

Section 2 discusses the analytical tools offered in Sen's *Idea of Justice* to conceptualise situations of injustice, and its contention that 'public reasoning' is central to the transformation of unjust situations. Section 3 narrates the story of the Confederation of the Popular Economy Workers to

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<sup>2</sup> The definition includes workers in productive units which do not constitute a legal entity, have no formal accounting system, or have no registration of their production activities, and workers of formal companies who are employed without a legal contract.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication, Carolina Palacio, September 2014. For the global trend about the dissociation of work from labour rights and other social entitlements, see Standing (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Booklet 3 of CTEP, '*Nuestros Objetivos*' available at <http://ctepargentina.org/documentos>. In that respect, the CTEP inscribes itself in the line of those who have argued that the 'slum problem' and the structural roots of urban segregation are best addressed not through housing and sanitation policies, but through work and increasing the productive capacities of those who reside in these marginal areas (Cohen 2014).

bring about a more just state of affairs. Section 4 discusses the role of theological resources in the mobilization of informal sector workers to transform unjust economic structures. It focuses on the social teachings of the Catholic Church and the texts of the Second Vatican Council with regard to ecclesiology, i.e. how the church understands itself and its mission in the world, and liturgy. The paper concludes with outlining some of the risks of theological mediation in social mobilization.

## 2 Amartya Sen's Idea of Justice

What is justice and what constitutes a just society? While John Rawls revolutionized political theory in the 1970s by constructing an ideal theory of justice of what a just society might look like, Amartya Sen offered a counter-revolution in his *Idea of Justice* by constructing a non-ideal theory of justice, or rather by proposing some sketches of what one needs to pay attention to when attempting at removing suffering and injustices in the here and now. Sen's analytical framework is particularly relevant for analysing the struggles of informal economy workers to eliminate the injustices which prevent them from developing themselves as persons. Two features are discussed here: its conception of justice rooted in a comparative assessment of states of affairs from the perspective of people's opportunities to live flourishing human lives, and the central role it gives to agency, or the ability people have to act and transform unjust states of affairs.

Rejecting that the question of what a just society is constitutes the starting point for thinking about justice, Sen's *Idea of Justice* advances the argument that 'questions of justice' are best based 'first, on assessments of social realizations, that is, on what actually happens (rather than merely on the appraisal of institutions and arrangements); and second, on comparative issues of enhancement of justice (rather than trying to identify perfectly just arrangements)' (Sen 2009: 410). The normative space proposed for this comparative assessment is that of the capability space.<sup>5</sup> One situation is better than another if people have more opportunities to enjoy valuable beings and doings ('capabilities'), such as being healthy, working in safe conditions, forming a life plan, enjoying time with family and friends, living in damp-free and non-overcrowded housing conditions and moving around the city without fear.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, a situation where Argentinian popular economy workers enjoy health insurance and protection against labour accidents would be comparatively better than the current situation in which most of them do not enjoy such opportunities. A waste picker who cuts himself badly and is unable to work for a long period of time, leaving his children to do the work instead of going to school, is worse off than another waste picker who belongs to a legal recycling cooperative and receives free health treatment and compensatory payment while work incapacitated. A situation where both waste pickers receive protection from labour accidents would be 'better', or more

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<sup>5</sup> Sen does however not reduce the informational basis of justice to the capability space only, there can be other morally relevant claims to judge situations.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions about what counts as 'valuable' beings and doings, see, among others, Alkire (2002), Alkire and Deneulin (2009), Deneulin (2014), Nussbaum (2011), Robeyns (2008), Sen (1985, 1992, 1993, 2004).

‘just’, than the current situation, even if both still live in a shanty town without proper public infrastructure and respect for the rule of law.

It is this comparative element which gives rise to the emancipatory potential of Sen’s account of justice. It is ‘the contrast between what is happening and what could have happened that is central to the advancement of justice’ (Sen 2009: 389). We have to note here that it is not a comparison between what exists and what is ‘not yet’ (Dinerstein 2014), but the contrast between what exists in one situation and what already exists in another, either in the same country or in other countries. In our case, it is the contrast between the lives of informal economy workers and the lives of other workers in the Argentinian economy, e.g. the contrast in terms of access to health care and labour insurance between a woman who gets up at 4am in the morning to bake bread at home and sell it every day on the streets and another woman who gets up at 4am to bake bread in a productive unit, whether cooperative or limited capital enterprise. The comparative information regarding the ‘beings and doings’ people are able to enjoy is then made publicly available so that appropriate remedial actions can be taken. Once information about the various disadvantages people experience is made public reflection about responsibility to transform the situation can begin (Gilardone 2013). Thus, by gathering information about the comparative disadvantage of informal sector workers in relation to private and public sector workers, or gathering information about the wellbeing opportunities of people who live in the city’s shanty towns compared to other residents of the city (Suárez et al., 2014), some action can start to happen.

‘Public reasoning’ is the privileged mechanism in Sen’s account of justice to reduce the contrast between the current situation and what it could be, should certain actions be taken. Sen has never written explicitly about what ‘public reasoning’ exactly consists of. However, the following references give some clues about its essential components:

The ideal of public reasoning is closely linked to two particular social practices that deserve specific attention: the tolerance of different points of view (along with the acceptability of agreeing to disagree) and the encouragement of public discussion (along with endorsing the value of learning from others). (Sen 2003: 31)

Reasoning with others involves presenting one’s point of view and paying serious attention to the points of view of others. This can be done through the media or public meetings, and through conversations with others on relevant subjects. [...] Agitation, demonstration and campaigning can indeed be important parts of public reasoning, when people connect with each other through speech – even if noisy speech. (Drèze and Sen, 2013: 259)

Public reasoning helps to make us understand each other’s problems and see each other’s perspectives. (Drèze and Sen, 2013: 260)

When we try to assess [...] which kind of societies should be understood to be patently unjust, we have reason to listen and pay some attention to the views and suggestions of others, which might or might not lead us to revise some of our own conclusions. (Sen 2009: 88)

In arguing that the pursuit of a theory of justice has something to do with the kind of creatures we human beings are, it is [...] to note the fact that a number of different theories of justice share some common presumptions about what it is like to be a human being. [...] I have made considerable use



of the existence of the human faculties just mentioned (for example, the ability to sympathize and to reason). (Sen 2009: 414-5)

Only the wearer may know where the shoe pinches, but pinch-avoiding arrangements cannot be effectively undertaken without giving voice to the people and giving them extensive opportunities for discussion. (Sen 2013: 24)

Three key characteristics of public reasoning can be derived from Sen's comparative account of justice: voice, dialogue and empathy. Injustice reductions, or actions at 'pinch-avoiding arrangements', start with expressing what ails in one's life, crying out the sufferings and deprivations one is experiencing (voice), making one's voice heard and seeking interlocutors who will listen, and discuss ways of reforming existing or creating new institutional arrangements which would eliminate the 'pinch' (dialogue), with the ability to put oneself in the position of another person as a necessary feature of that dialogue (empathy).

A central feature of Sen's account of 'public reasoning' is the capacity to enter the perspective of another person and see the world from his or her perspective. Empathy and reasoning go together. In other words, reasoning is connected to the existence of certain 'virtues', understood in the classical sense of acquired moral dispositions or character traits: disposition to listen to another person even if her views are different from one's own, to learn from her and possibly change one's view. The figure of Adam Smith's impartial spectator is the one Sen often uses to illustrate his account of public reasoning, as someone who tries to view the world from the perspective of other people, to listen to their views and, if need be, revise their own judgements. This does not rule out the absence of conflict and disagreement – as the next section will show, a public reasoning process around an issue is often triggered by conflict, or the creation of what Nancy Fraser would call 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser 1990: 67) – but it assumes that these 'impartial spectator' dispositions to become the conditions for agreement, even partial, to be reached and transformative action to be taken.

In each of these characteristics of public reasoning – voicing one's pain, being listened to, discussing ways of remedying the pain – relationships of recognition play a key role. Without anyone to recognize one's voice as legitimate, without anyone to recognize that listening to the person's voice may challenge one's view and vice-versa, there can be no public reasoning. Borrowing from the work of Axel Honneth, Uruguayan philosopher Gustavo Pereira (2013) has argued that there are three domains in which people need to be recognized by others in order to be able to engage in public reasoning: 1) the domain of intimate and close relationships where people acquire self-trust (people need to be recognized for who they are so they are able to understand their own needs and express them); 2) the domain of legal relationships where people acquire self-respect (people need to be recognized as equal subjects of rights so they are able to understand themselves as deserving equal treatment and claim what is their due); 3) the domain of social relationships where people acquire self-esteem (people need to be recognized for their achievements so they are able to understand themselves as having talents and able to contribute to the life of society). Pereira (2013: 65) concludes that it is impossible for people to engage in

public reasoning, that is, to argue a position on the ground of reasons, make claims or disagree with others, without having these relations to oneself of self-trust, self-esteem and self-respect which are acquired through interaction with others. The next section narrates how popular economy workers in Buenos Aires are engaging in public reasoning to create the conditions of more flourishing lives.

### 3 The Story of Popular Economy Workers

Sergio Sánchez is a waste picker in the city of Buenos Aires, who was catapulted in the international spotlight when sitting on the front row in his waste picker uniform in the Basilica of St Peter in Rome at the installation of Jorge Bergoglio as Pope Francis in March 2013.<sup>7</sup> Sergio started to search waste to recycle in the 1990s after losing his job. In 2002, he met a group of students who had started a street soup kitchen in response to the December 2001 economic crisis. Little by little, they started to get to know each other and listen to each other's life and the problems waste pickers faced – the exploitation of intermediaries, the bribes they had to pay, the dangerous work conditions, child labour, economic insecurity, inability to plan their lives, etc.<sup>8</sup> The students taught them about their rights, and helped them value more the work they were doing. They also made them realise that it was wrong to have to pay bribes in order to work. As the meetings on the streets for the weekly soup kitchen went by, an organization was formed, the Movement of Excluded Workers, as a more institutionalized platform to speak in the public domain. As Sergio puts it, 'Before, every *cartonero* looked after him/herself only, but we had to speak with one voice. I was lucky to have had good teachers who taught me I had rights and had to fight for them.'<sup>9</sup>

Their confidence to speak up in the public sphere as one collective body and voice 'what ailed in their lives', to paraphrase Sen, took another turn in 2007, when they encountered the then Catholic archbishop of Buenos Aires Jorge Bergoglio. The Archdiocese had started to organize an annual event, the *carpa misionera* or missionary tent, in the Plaza Constitución in Buenos Aires, a public square where the city's marginalized residents conglomerate. The event consisted in putting tents and stalls for one day in the square, with various pastoral agents available for any passers-by to talk about what burdened their lives (Azcuay 2014). Bergoglio was celebrating the closing liturgy and this is where he came to meet the waste pickers. Their relationship with the cardinal strengthened the public legitimacy of their claims. On the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2014, on the eve of a march to demand the right of popular economy workers to form a union, the now Pope Francis sent a video message in which he insisted on the importance of their work, comparing it to the creation of poetry, and in which he affirmed their social action.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Sergio, December 2014. For a short story on his life, see <http://hosting.soundslides.com/tcfcz>.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, Rafael Chamky, CTEP coordinator, December 2014. The initiative was a response from young students eager to engage in politics in a new way: seeing people as persons and not clients for political gains, hence the emphasis on listening to their stories and entering into their lives.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication, December 2014.

<sup>10</sup> The video is entitled 'Mensaje del Papa Francisco para todos los trabajadores de la economía popular en el 1 de Mayo 2014', available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w74dl3nyq9w>.

Today, Sergio works as an urban recycler in a cooperative directly contracted by the city government. The waste is sorted in a recycling centre with proper technology and hygiene conditions. He earns a modest but stable income and benefits from a pension and health security scheme, insurance against accidents. He is one of the lucky 0.3% of Argentina's popular economy workers to enjoy such opportunities to work in safe conditions, earn a stable income and have health insurance.

What led to this comparative improvement in the lives of some popular economy workers has not been the result of state beneficence but the exercise of the agency of the workers themselves, and the result of processes of recognition which facilitated their participation in 'public reasoning' and enabled them to articulate their pain, speak, being listened to and discuss ways of remedying the pain. In the case of Sergio, there was the reconstruction of relation to the self which enabled him to articulate and voice what he was living. The relations he had with the people of the soup kitchen, and with Bergoglio, were friendships through which he learned to articulate his needs. One could also add here the disposition of 'empathy' where the young students of the soup kitchen were trying to see the world from the workers perspective and discuss with them what best actions to take in order to change their situation. This regained self-trust led to recognition in the domain of legal relationships, with Sergio now benefiting from a health insurance and pension (self-respect), and the domain of social relationships with his work as waste picker now winning social approval as an environmental service to society (self-esteem). Sergio's individual narrative can of course not be detached from the wider collective narrative, and the nurturing of agency at a collective level.

Until 2002, collecting waste on the streets of the federal capital city of Buenos Aires was illegal. The scale of waste picking activities in the city had become such after the 2001 crisis that the bribery problem could no longer be ignored from public discussions. In November 2002, the decriminalization of the scavenging activity was up for debate in the governing assembly of the city. The argument that scavenging was a form of 'work' and that its prohibition violated the constitutional right to work, won (Perelman 2010). The abolition of the law considerably changed the public perception of waste pickers and contributed to transforming their identity from scavengers to urban recyclers.

In addition to this decriminalization, in the wake of the cooperative movement which had sprung up in Argentina in the aftermath of the 2001-2 crisis, some waste pickers began to form cooperatives in order to eliminate the intermediaries between them and the companies. Until then, waste pickers worked separately and depended on middlemen for the logistics and selling of their recycled waste to companies. This context was conducive to exploitation as the intermediaries bought their products at the lowest possible price. Through cooperatives, workers were able to pull resources together to contract lorries and drivers themselves, send their products directly to companies and negotiate a fair price.

After these small gains, bolder actions followed in 2008. With waste pickers living in the city's peripheries and their work in the city centre, they had won a few years back an agreement with train companies to reserve one carriage empty of seats so they could commute to work with their carts. Given public hygiene preoccupations and complaints from passengers, train companies decided to end this facility. In reaction to this decision, waste pickers occupied public squares in the city centre. This created a social conflict with the public authorities who tried to remove them by force. After dialogue, and the finding out of the information that the city government was paying large sums of money to a private contractor to recycle less waste than waste pickers, an agreement was concluded. The contract with the private contractor was ended and the money was redirected to subsidize waste pickers, provide uniforms to make the work safer, organize waste sorting in designated recycling centres with appropriate technology, provide lorries to transport the recycled materials to companies, and special buses for the workers' commute. Another part of the negotiation was the granting of insurance against labour accidents and the provision of child nurseries, paid for by the local government. This process of organizing over a decade transformed an activity with poor technology dominated by a mafia into a cooperative system of urban recycling with appropriate technology, safe labour conditions, more decent and secure salary and reduced incidence of child labour.

In this collective narrative, voice, empathy and dialogue were critical, as were relationships of recognition and the generation of social conflict to make their voices heard. The abolition of the illegality of waste picking was the result of a dialogue, where the voice of waste pickers had become such it could no longer be ignored, and where different positions were discussed in the city's assembly and an agreement found. The recognition by public authorities of waste picking as work contributed towards rebuilding relations of self-respect and self-esteem. The cooperative movement provided a space for voice to be strengthened. No individual waste picker on his or her own could stop middlemen taking advantage of them to do their work.<sup>11</sup> The train incident illustrates how dialogue can take place within conflicting positions and how creative agreements can unfold from different views brought together in critical scrutiny.

The waste pickers of the city of Buenos Aires were not the only informal sector workers to engage in public reasoning to improve their situation. Joining with other sectors, the Confederation of the Popular Economy Workers (CTEP) was formed in December 2011. It is organized under a National Secretariat with different representative branches: garment workers, motorcyclists, street vendors, stall holders, craftsmen and women, small farmers, vegetable producers, brick makers, and workers in recuperated factories.<sup>12</sup> The CTEP acts as a relational space where individual popular economy workers can learn to express their problems (self-trust), acquire rights granted

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<sup>11</sup> This collective voice was also facilitated by many *cartoneros* living in the same neighbourhoods and having to commute together to the city centre. Other popular economy workers, such as street vendors, are more isolated and dispersed (Personal communication with Julio, a street vendor organization leader, November 2014, and Claudia, an urban recycler leader, December 2014).

<sup>12</sup> These are factories which had gone bankrupt after the 2001-2 crisis, but which workers themselves recuperated under the form of cooperative ownership and management.

to other workers (self-respect) and gain greater legitimacy for their work (self-esteem). The CTEP has created an integral health and education programme, which includes a mutual insurance scheme, medical and dental consultations and health prevention. In collaboration with an Argentine university, it offers an academic Certificate in Popular Economy and Territorial Development so that workers can acquire conceptual tools and skills to understand better their work environment.

For the time being, the CTEP is a civil association. The Argentinian government refuses union status because it does not yet recognize informal economy workers as workers. Among the reasons advanced are:<sup>13</sup> the government's refusal to acknowledge that there are workers whom the formal sector cannot and will never be able to absorb, the fear of other unions losing their political power, the fear of a race at the bottom with the risk of legitimizing the informal economy. Recognition of union status would be a crucial step to construct a platform for the voices of popular economy workers to be heard and for dialogue to take place. In the words of Claudia, an urban recycler who went to Geneva for a conference on the transformation of the informal economy at the International Labour Office in July 2014, 'Nobody can represent a worker like me, no union, no business, no government. I do not want to be a second or third class worker, but a worker like any other worker'.<sup>14</sup> Or in the words of the leader of the street vendors organization, when talking of his work obstacles – the city government has continuously refused to issue trade permit to street vendors, making police bribery thrive: 'If the state does not provide conditions for employment, and people have to invent their work, we are not going to let the state take that work away. No worker has more right than another, we are all the same.'<sup>15</sup>

#### 4 Theological Resources

The above narrative has illustrated how 'public reasoning', in the sense of a public discussion structured by some dispositions related to dialogue and listening, and how the agency of marginalized people through forming organizations to make their voices heard, can transform some of the unjust structures which prevent them from living well, such as corruption which left them with no other choice but bribe to be able to work, the social stigma the general population had against them, their exclusion from some social protection. That narrative would however not be complete without the explicit acknowledgement of the mediation of theological resources in facilitating this 'public reasoning' process.

The influence of theological resources, understood as religious texts and their interpretation, is first noticeable in Sen's own approach to conceptualising in/justice. In a recent paper, Sen (2014) acknowledges his immense debt to Buddha as an inspiration for his own work and life. Among the influences, he cites Buddha's response to suffering. This is noticeable in Sen's non-ideal approach to justice, starting from the pain and what ails in people's lives, or what he would call 'capability

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, Rafael Chomsky, December 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, December 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication, November 2014.

deprivation' or lack of opportunities people have to enjoy valuable human beings and doings. He cites Buddha's non-parochial attitude and universalism as another formative influence, along with his emphasis on dialogue and reasoning to solve disagreement and underpin actions. A manifest influence of this is how Sen has used comparisons and dialogue between different experiences to enact change. Discussing access to primary health care for all, Sen (2015) makes extensive use of comparisons, and even hint at what the Americans could learn from the Rwandese about reforming their own public health system. It is not a coincidence that he starts his comparative analysis of health care provision worldwide by the story of Buddha moved by compassion at the suffering of others.

As far as the struggles of Argentine informal economy workers to improve their lives are concerned, two particular sets of theological resources have played an important part in forming them as agents of social transformation, and in facilitating their voices to be heard: the texts of the social teachings of the Catholic Church and the texts of the Second Vatican Council with regard to ecclesiology (how the Church understands itself and its mission in the world) and liturgy (how religious rituals are celebrated and their meaning for those who participate in them). While no strict relationship of cause and effect can be established, the influence of these texts cannot be put aside, and is manifest in the formation booklets written by the CTEP for its members.<sup>16</sup>

Between 1962 and 1965, more than 2,000 Catholic bishops and theologians gathered in Rome for a council, known as the Second Vatican Council, to discuss the role and mission of the Catholic Church in the modern world. They drafted several new constitutions to define the direction of the life of the Church and its members. One of these was the Pastoral Constitution, entitled *Gaudium et Spes* or 'Joy and Hope', which invited 'every person of goodwill' to respond to the 'signs of the times' and to make the 'joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted' their own.<sup>17</sup> In order to scrutinize and respond to 'the signs of time' and understand the 'joys, griefs and anxieties of those who are afflicted', the Catholic Church has developed a set of resources, known as Catholic Social Teaching, which provide an analysis of the realities of the modern world in the light of the Christian faith and which come under the form of papal encyclicals – although sanctioned by popes and bearing their signature, they are not written singlehandedly but rely on many writing hands and experiences. The first of these resources was published in 1891 and sought to respond to the problems of industrialisation and the exploitation of workers. It called on governments to legislate for minimum wages to enable workers' families to cover the basic necessities of life, to guarantee labour rights such as protection against illness and accidents, and it affirmed the right of workers to form unions so that their voices could be heard in policy decisions.<sup>18</sup> The teaching resources related to work have been particularly influential in the struggles of the CTEP.

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<sup>16</sup> The booklets are available in Spanish at <http://ctepargentina.org/documentos>.

<sup>17</sup> Paragraphs 1 and 4, at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>18</sup> For an introduction to Catholic Social Teaching, see Hornby-Smith (2006).

The encyclical *Laborem Exercens* ('Exercising work'), published by Pope John Paul II in 1981, re-takes the themes of the first late nineteenth century encyclical, but expands on the philosophy of work. It emphasises that working is part of one's humanity. Through work, human beings create: 'Work is a good thing for men and women – a good thing for their humanity – because through work humans not only transform nature, adapting it to their own needs, but they also achieve fulfilment as human beings and indeed, in a sense, become more a human being.'<sup>19</sup> That work is a fundamental dimension of human existence has been re-emphasised by the Latin American bishops gathered in Aparecida in Brazil in 2007 to set the guidelines of the Church's ministry in Latin America. They saw work as 'the essential key to the whole social question.'<sup>20</sup>

The teaching that work is part of one's humanity has been central to building the self-esteem of popular economy workers. They are workers like everyone else. The work of someone who collects urban rubbish on his or her cart to sort the different components at home has the same human value as the work of someone who collects recycling boxes or containers for a company. Therefore, every worker should enjoy similar labour guarantees for the work they do. Whether one works for a recycling company or one works as independent urban recycler should not lead to different guarantees, such as one worker continuing to receive an income while ill so that his or her family can eat, and the other foregoing revenues and his family experiencing hunger. The right of workers to form a union to demand their socio-economic rights is fundamental. The direct intervention of Pope Francis to support the CTEP's demand to be recognized as a union (cf. note 11) is a direct expression of these teachings.

Another teaching from *Laborem Exercens* which transpires in the activities of the CTEP is the importance of the family from whom the worker cannot be isolated. In that sense, the CTEP provides a more integral perspective to the 'decent work' agenda pushed by the International Labour Organization and traditional labour unions. It includes creating the conditions in which workers perform labour activities which allow them *and* their families to live well (by offering for example recreation facilities for workers' children, and a health service provision oriented at the person as a whole).

A second set of teachings which has been pivotal in the narrative of Argentine informal economy workers is those that relate to the economy. These teachings are very prominent in the Apostolic Exhortation 'The Joy of the Gospel' (*Evangelii Gaudium*) which Pope Francis published in 2013:

The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person! We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real

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<sup>19</sup> Paragraph 9, at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html)

<sup>20</sup> Paragraph 120, at <http://www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf>

concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption. While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation.<sup>21</sup>

When the overriding goal of economic production is the maximisation of profits, the human person becomes a commodity to be used or discarded. This is why informal economy workers see themselves as 'leftovers' of an economic system which cannot include them. In one of the CTEP formative booklets, they speak of themselves as being surplus waste that society does not want and puts in sanitized belts away from urban centres to avoid the bad smells. Their articulation of themselves as urban leftovers or waste and of this state of affairs as being the result of man-made economic structures, which can be changed through human actions, has been strongly enhanced by the Church's theological resources on the topic. They have particularly emphasised that it is the lack of solidarity, and the prevalence of greed and self-interest, which is at the heart of economic structures which excludes workers. In the words of the Latin American bishops in their 2007 meeting in Aparecida in Brazil, and of Pope Francis who was the lead writer of the document:

A globalization without solidarity has a negative impact on the poorest groups. It is no longer simply the phenomenon of exploitation and oppression, but something new: social exclusion. What is affected is the very root of belonging to the society in which one lives, because one is no longer on the bottom, on the margins, or powerless, but rather one is living outside. The excluded are not simply 'exploited' but 'surplus' and 'disposable'.<sup>22</sup>

Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape. Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. [...] It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society's underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the 'exploited' but the outcast, the 'leftovers'.<sup>23</sup>

The actions of the CTEP have been oriented at bringing activities of economic production and consumption at the service of the human person and her family. They are seeking to transform the economic structures which keep them in a relationship of exclusion. The example of the transformation of the economic activity of rubbish pickers, from scavengers to urban recyclers organized in cooperatives is a good example of this.

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<sup>21</sup> Paragraphs 55-56, at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html). That the economy should serve the person, and not vice-versa, is a teaching central to the encyclical published by John Paul II in 1991 to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first social encyclical of the Catholic Church (*Centesimus Annus*) and on which Pope Francis's Exhortation heavily draws.

<sup>22</sup> Paragraph 65, <http://www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Paragraph 53, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).



In addition to the teachings on the economy, one can also mention those on solidarity, which was discussed at length by the encyclical published by John Paul II in 1987 'On Social Concern' (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*), and in which solidarity is defined as: 'not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far' but as 'a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.'<sup>24</sup> The Latin American bishops confirmed in 2007 the role of the Church in accompanying permanently the efforts of the most vulnerable and excluded to be subjects of change and transformation of their situation, as an expression of that solidarity.<sup>25</sup>

This understanding of the mission of the Church in the world as standing in solidarity with those who suffer, who are oppressed and excluded, and accompanying them in their efforts to change the structures which oppress, exclude and harm them, was central to the documents of the Second Vatican Council. This is where ecclesiological resources (teachings which relate to how the Church understands itself and its relation to the world) meet liturgical resources as mediators in the struggles of excluded people to transform their lives and change the structures which currently prevent them from living flourishing human lives. Liturgy operates as resource for social change at two levels: building community and generating hope.

Liturgy allows for a space where people who would otherwise not meet can come together. The annual open air mass for popular economy workers celebrated since 2007 played some part in their collective organizing. The 'missionary tent' in Plaza Constitución provided a common space for workers to voice their difficulties and find common ways to overcome them. But liturgy is not simply a gathering of people. It is also prefigures a certain kind of society.

Within the Catholic tradition, liturgies are celebrated to commemorate the life, death and resurrection of Christ and a new creation where evil and suffering is overcome. Participating in liturgy is not attending a meeting but making present the reality of a world to come, a world without injustice and suffering, a world in which the whole creation is reconciled with its Creator, what Christians call the 'Kingdom of God', and which has already been inaugurated by Christ's resurrection. The 2014 annual popular economy workers liturgy was celebrated for 'a society without slaves and excluded'. As highlighted earlier, it is precisely in that comparative gap, between the reality that is (a society with trafficked persons, slave labourers and workers not included as full citizens with socio-economic rights fulfilled), and a reality that could be (a society where slave labour and human trafficking would be eliminated and where there would be no excluded workers), that actions for comparative improvement can be taken. In other words, liturgies operate a social function of generating hope, of signalling that a situation does not have

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<sup>24</sup> Paragraph 38, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html).

<sup>25</sup> Paragraph 394, <http://www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf>

to be like it is and can be changed.<sup>26</sup> Liturgies can play a part, although not intentionally, in what has been called 'emancipatory politics' (Dinerstein 2014).

These two elements of liturgy, organizing people and generating hope, took global dimensions in October 2014 when Pope Francis invited more than a hundred representatives of social movements of excluded people (informal sector workers, landless peasants, unemployed, slum dwellers, homeless) for a three-day meeting at the Vatican so that their voices could be heard.<sup>27</sup> The Pope celebrated a liturgy where symbols of the struggles of the excluded were brought as offerings at the altar of St Peter's Basilica: a makeshift house to symbolize their hope to live in adequate housing, a cart of a rubbish picker to symbolize their hope to work in conditions that enable them and their families to develop fully as persons, and a basket of fruit and vegs to symbolize their hope to protect the environment and farm sustainably so that all can have enough to eat.

This 3-day meeting at the Vatican adds another dimension to the mediation of theological resources in the actions of marginalized groups to overcome 'what ails their lives', not only in the formation of agents of social transformation, but in the provision of a platform for dialogue on how to change economic and institutional arrangements which exclude people. We are still at a very early stage of what this new platform for global dialogue on transforming unjust economic and social structures that Pope Francis has opened will lead to. Time will tell but a path has certainly been taken on which there is no walk backwards.

## 5 Conclusion

The paper has analysed how one group of excluded people, the informal economy workers in Argentina, engage in 'public reasoning' processes, that is, are making their voices and sufferings heard by the population at large, and through dialogue, sometimes after the creation of social conflict, are acting to transform the unjust structures which ail their lives. Among these structures, there is a corrupt police which leaves many workers with no other choice but bribe in order to work or force them to work in a state of fear, a public health insurance system which only includes formal economy workers and leaves many workers unprotected from illness and labour accidents. The paper has argued that theological resources can play an important mediating role as facilitator of dialogue and 'public reasoning' processes in the transformation of unjust structures. They construct a space where relationships can be built with those who suffer from capability deprivation and their voices listened to. They also provide normative guidelines about social analysis and about how to act and take remedial action. Most of all, they build community and help organize people collectively, and generate hope. They point to a reality where humans will no longer live in oppressive, dominating and excluding relationships with fellow humans and with nature, a reality which will always be out of reach but which has already been inaugurated by the incarnation. Theological resources mediate actions towards this 'ideal' society in 'non-ideal' situations, but this mediation is not risk-free.

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<sup>26</sup> See Dinerstein and Deneulin (2012) for a discussion of hope in Marxism and in Christianity.

<sup>27</sup> See <http://movimientospopulares.org>, and Czerny and Fogliozzo (2015) for an analysis of the event.

Members of social movements, like the Argentinian informal sector worker movement, come from a very varied political spectrum. Holding sometimes extremely different political positions under the same organizational umbrella around the united aim of creating the social, economic and political conditions for informal economy workers to develop fully as persons, is a constant challenge. Syncretism of political ideas may be a strength if the united objective is successful at transcending divisions, but the temptation to co-opt ideas and bring them into a home in which they do not belong, is real. Theological resources can sometimes be used for partisan political end. It is one thing to create a space of dialogue for different views to be heard and another to transform that space into a political platform for the given agendas of certain political groups. For example, Woods (2007) tells the story of the conflict surrounding one parish in Greater Buenos Aires where the ordained minister opened his house and church buildings for a political organisation of unemployed workers to meet. He was removed by church authorities for going beyond the mediation and pastoral accompaniment role of the Church. The lumping together of theological resources to create a more just society with a specific political party is a risk the Argentine Catholic Church is particularly prone to. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was not unusual for some ordained ministers to identify the Church with the Peronist political party (Martín 2010), and this has resurfaced in the last decade.

The CTEP has been able to maintain its political independence and is proud to house under its roof Christian social democrats, socialists, Marxists, Peronists, etc., who share the same aim of improving the lives of informal economy workers through the transformation of the unjust structures which deprive them of opportunities to live well as persons. The mediation of theological resources has been critical in building the organization itself, in facilitating dialogue and in conceptualising social analysis and transformative action. So far, the locus of this transformation has been the informal economy workers themselves, local and national state institutions. There is a burgeoning attempt to reach international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization, and build an international structure where the voices of the excluded and marginalized could be heard and listened to. Very little has been done yet about engaging with businesses and multi-national companies to transform their incentive structure and put the workers and service to society as their primary objective. Theological resources have a yet untapped potential to transform unjust structures. Unleashing their potential will require the wisdom of doves and cunningness of serpents.

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