To

Ann and Jim

Ann and Michael

Encountering the City

Urban Encounters from Accra to New York

Edited by

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Chapter 10
Working Across Class Difference in Popular Assemblies in Buenos Aires

Mónica Farías

Introduction

Geographers have been interested in studying the effects of encounters with difference and processes of class border-crossing for a long time. For instance, as economic restructuring transformed women's position in the labour market, Marxist-feminist geographers explored the home as a site of increasing contact between the middle and working classes (McDowell 2006; Pratt 1998). As increasing numbers of middle class women left the house to work in professional or managerial jobs, working class women stepped into their homes to look after the children, raising questions about the effects of these interactions (McDowell 2008; Pratt 1998). At the same time, middle class women working in unskilled jobs and therefore moving across different class locations throughout the day, raised the question of whether coming into contact with other experiences and needs might lead to more progressive politics among middle class women (Pratt and Hanson 1994).

As shown in the introduction to this volume, the revival of interest in 'contact theory' (Allport 1954) over the last few years has driven a prolific scholarship concerned with encountering difference in a variety of urban spaces and under very different circumstances. Briefly put, this scholarship is concerned with asking whether the coming together of people from different cultural, ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds in specific sites can reduce prejudice and social conflict and enhance the chances for inter-group understanding (Amin 2002; Valentine 2008).

Some scholars have paid closer attention to the structures of power within which contact happens, and have pointed to how they condition and shape the type of encounter that takes place, limiting or enhancing its potential to disrupt and challenge negative stereotypes (Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine 2012; Lawson and Elwood 2014; Leitner 2012). Awareness of this has signalled the limits and risks of micromanaged encounters designed to reduce conflict within specific communities. This is in part because even when 'meaningful contact' (Valentine 2008) happens between individuals, it does not necessarily mean that more positive attitudes towards a wider social group or identity will necessarily follow (Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Valentine 2008).

In this chapter, I expand the analysis of the negotiation of difference by paying attention to spaces that have been overlooked as loci for contact across class. It asks what kinds of relationships emerge in sites where diversity is seen as an asset and in which people voluntarily participate. What are the implications of sustained work across class in the context of an organisation meant to bridge difference? I explore these questions reflecting on experiences of encounter in *Asambleas Populares* (Popular Assemblies) in the city of Buenos Aires. In the following section, I provide the historical background of the emergence of the *Asambleas Populares* and briefly comment on the two specific sites under study. I then draw on ethnographic fieldwork to illustrate the interactions that take place in these spaces and the interpretations people give to them. I conclude with a reflection on how *Asambleas Populares* can contribute to research on zones of encounter and the potential they hold for the reconfiguration of class identities and the promotion of a more progressive urban politics.

Asambleas populares in Buenos Aires

On the night of December 19, 2001, thousands of people took to the streets of Buenos Aires and other cities in Argentina in blunt defiance of President De La Rúa's state of siege decree.[1] Popular protests against the devastating effects of structural reforms on the labor market, as well as the dismantling of the welfare state, had been a constant throughout the 1990s (Auyero 2002). Scholars highlighted the novelty of these new social movements and pointed to the contrasting goals and strategies they deployed, as well as the different actors participating in relation to past protests (Dinerstein 2010; Seoane 2002). The popular uprising of December 2001 represented the peak of these protests, which condensed the struggles of the past decade in the widely repeated slogan '¡que se *vayan todos!*' (they all must go!)[2] (Dinerstein 2002).

The *Asambleas Populares*[3] emerged in that context and represented a new form of doing politics. As this chapter will argue, they provided a space for the participation and reconstitution of the political identity of the middle class (Svampa and Corral 2006). By March 2002, there were over one hundred *Asambleas* in Buenos Aires, mostly composed of middle class people ('Nacieron

1 In response to the increase of social unrest around the country, on the night of December 19, the President declared the 'Estado de Sitio', an emergency measure that limits the exercise of certain fundamental rights.

2 'They all must go!' was the motto repeated over and over again in protests. It demanded the resignation of all the politicians in the public administration as well as the members of the Supreme Court of Justice.

3 The *Asambleas* received different denominations according to the way their members understood its purpose. Thus, there were *Asambleas 'Barriales'* or '*Vecinales'* (Neighborhood Assemblies) and *Asambleas Populares'* (Popular Assemblies).

272 asambleas luego de los cacerolazos', 2002). They first met in public spaces, such as emblematic street corners or parks in the neighborhood. Later on, some moved into buildings that were either rented, borrowed or occupied. They quickly organised themselves into 'commissions' – employment, health, media – and engaged in a variety of neighbourhood projects. This ranged from setting up community kitchens, promoting microenterprise projects for the unemployed, carrying out vaccination campaigns for the *cartoneros*,[4] providing support to the factories recovered by their workers, or campaigning against evictions of families in precarious housing situations.

From the beginning, the *Asambleas* sought to reach out and build bonds with groups from the lower classes to provide them with support as well as to find new ways of organising together. The media (Calvo 2002; Vales 2002) and the protagonists of these events described them as 'an encounter between the middle class and the poor' (Asamblea del Cid 2002). Scholars have also commented on the novelty of these encounters referring to this process as a sort of symbolic border crossing (Grimson 2008). That is, the presence of *cartoneros*, who make their living through picking waste, in traditionally middle class neighbourhoods, had the effect of reducing middle class anxieties and fears about the 'poor other'. Some even articulated caring actions towards them, such as separating the garbage from the recyclable material or providing them with a place to sleep and food. These cross-class encounters have also been partially explained as the result of a blurring and erosion of symbolic and physical borders between classes (Adamovsky 2010).

Shortly after their birth, however, most of the *Asambleas* disintegrated or shifted their purpose. By 2005, only a handful of them were still working in the city. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to assess the reasons for the general demise of the *Asambleas*' movement or to speculate about the trajectories followed by their members.[5] Instead, I want to focus on two of the *Asambleas Populares* that have remained active since their emergence in 2001 in order to explore their rich experience of working across class difference.

In relation to where the encounter across class difference happens, most scholars have looked at public or quasi-public spaces (Brown 2012; Laurier and Philo 2006; Leitner 2012), including micro public spaces (Askins and Pain 2011; Hemming 2011; Lawson and Elwood 2014). The *Asambleas* under study in this chapter emerged from encounters *in* public space and their interactions have remained public even though they abandoned the streets long ago and now function

4 *Cartoneros* are unemployed people who make a living by selling cardboard and other recyclable material that they find in the garbage. They became very visible in the city of Buenos Aires in 2001 and 2002.

5 In relation to the end of the *Asambleas*' movement see (Pousadela 2011; Rossi 2005; Svampa and Pandolfi 2004). The impact of the participation in *Asambleas* reflected on the paths taken by former members is something that I am only beginning to explore.

in their own buildings.[6] Their doors stay open to everyone who wants to collaborate and be a part of the movement. The dynamics of these 'public communal' spaces (Fernández 2006) are partly shaped and conditioned by a sometimes ambiguous relation with the state at its different levels. They are autonomous organisations and often take a critical stand towards the state, but in some situations they also depend on the state for resources or services.

The literature on 'encounters' has paid attention to both casual and brief exchanges (Laurier and Philo 2006; Wilson 2011) along with more sustained encounters (Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine 2012; Andersson 2011). In the latter case, encounters happen in places where people regularly go to carry out an activity, and therefore, contact happens repeatedly over a longer period of time thereby lasting longer than fleeting encounters in public space. Examples of such places might include campuses, schools, community centers or faith communities. As such, *Asambleas Populares* constitute a particularly interesting case not only because they engage in long-term encounters with difference but also because difference itself is welcomed. Every person who joins an *Asamblea* does so voluntarily. And, as my research suggests, almost everyone who does so is motivated by concerns for social justice and with the intention of working across difference. In this regard, they also diverge greatly from integration projects that are engineered to foster meaningful encounters in multicultural contexts (Askins and Pain 2011; Matejskova and Leitner 2011), or from long-term encounters in households mediated by established hierarchies of power (Schuermans 2013). It is necessary to keep this observation in mind in order to understand the nature of the different practices deployed in the two cases under study, as well as the kinds of relationships taking place within them.

I chose to focus my research on the *Asamblea de Flores* and the *Asamblea de Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* because they have remained autonomous, horizontal spaces[7] since their creation and because of the visibility of their work in their respective neighbourhoods. The *Asamblea de Flores* is located in a traditionally middle class neighbourhood. It started its meetings in a park but by the end of 2002 it had already occupied an abandoned four-story health clinic along with its contiguous house – all part of the same property. At first, the intention was to put the clinic back to work with the help of the National Movement of Recovered Enterprises[8], so as to provide health care for the workers of the recovered factories. This project – described by one member of the *Asamblea* as 'monumental' – was eventually abandoned and the clinic was instead transformed into single-room

6 In both cases they function in a physical space whose legal situation has been more or less regularised.

7 'Horizontality' refers to a form of decision-making and a way of functioning that rejects hierarchies.

8 The MNER (for its initials in Spanish) emerged in 2002 with the purpose of uniting all the recovered enterprises (which includes factories as well as other businesses) and providing them with institutional representation as well as support and advice.

apartments for people in precarious housing situations. Eventually, a housing cooperative was also created.

With the help of donations from shopkeepers in the neighbourhood, the *Asamblea* was, for a time, able to run a soup kitchen from the house. These days, the soup kitchen is run with a budget provided by the city's government and mostly focuses on the provision of food for the people living in the former clinic. The *Asamblea* also carries out a number of other initiatives like a *Bachillerato Popular* (Popular High School) that people affectionately call *Bachi*, a gender group, and diverse cultural activities like Bolivian dancing and self-taught acrobatics. Typical attendance at a plenary meeting – which happens once a month – ranges from between forty to sixty people while the number of people involved in the space in different degrees easily exceeds a hundred.

The *Asamblea de Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* is located in a working class neighborhood undergoing a process of gentrification. Like *Asamblea de Flores,* it also met in a park at the beginning and it did so for a couple of years until it built its current premises on a small park temporarily ceded by the city's government. As soon as it was created, the *Asamblea* started running a soup kitchen in the street, which was later moved into the building. The *Olla* (Pot), as people call the soup kitchen, has gone through many changes in its composition and goals, but to this day, it provides lunch for over eighty homeless people every Sunday.[9]

In the past, the *Asamblea* used to run some microenterprise projects which involved making bread and clothes but none of them continue today. Also, the *Asamblea* hosts a Literacy, Basic Education and Work Program unit (PAEByT) dependent on the city's government, and it opens its doors to different cultural collectives providing a space for their activities. As part of its commitment to the recuperation and preservation of collective memory, particularly in relation to the crimes committed during the last dictatorship (1976–1983), the *Asamblea* is involved in the Work and Consensus Committee of the former clandestine detention centre located in the neighbourhood. The monthly plenary meetings can have up to thirty people while its weekly meetings varies from ten to fifteen people.

Interventions in the *Olla*

It is 08.45 on a Sunday morning when I arrive at the *Asamblea* to participate in the *Olla*. Carlos, Verónica and Germán are already waiting in a park across the street for Leo and Carolina to open the door. While we wait, we make jokes and chat about what we did the night before. Carlos and Verónica used to live on the streets

9 Not all of the people who come to the *Olla* live in the streets. Some manage to rent a room in a cheap hostel where they share a bathroom and a kitchen and receive subsidies from the city's government to this end. For the sake of simplicity I will refer to all of the people who attend the *Olla* as 'homeless' regardless of whether they live in the streets or in a hostel room.

but both of them have managed to get a subsidy from the city's government to move into a cheap hostel room. Germán, however, still lives on the streets.

When the others arrive and we go into the *Asamblea* everyone knows exactly what to do. Leo fills the huge pot where the vegetables will be boiled with water. The others grab knives and cutting boards and slice potatoes, carrots, pumpkins and onions for the next hour or so. In the meantime, someone fires the *mate*[10] and puts some music on. A bit later, someone shows up in the window of the kitchen that faces the street and asks if they can come in to help. Walter is homeless and new in the *Olla*. This is the first time he has helped out. At one point, the noise of so many knives chopping vegetables is such that someone comments, 'this sounds like a metallurgical factory more than a kitchen!' We all laugh at the idea and carry on with the work.

The *Asamblea of Plaza Dorrego* has been running the soup kitchen for twelve years. It was first set up in the street in the summer of 2002. At that time, the *compañeros* of the *Asamblea* cooked the food in their homes and brought it to a busy street corner on the route that the *cartoneros* took to go back home after collecting garbage in the city's downtown. When the *Asamblea* built its premises in the park, the *Olla* moved indoors and it has been there ever since. There are three groups that rotate to cook every Sunday, each of which is composed of three to four members of the *Asamblea.* They also count on the help of several men and women who initially approached the *Olla* for food but for whom help with food preparation has become a more or less regular activity.

As the morning goes by people start queuing outside the *Asamblea.* Some come with their belongings in plastic bags, some come with children, some come alone. There are people of all ages. Every now and then someone sticks their head through the window and asks us to fill a plastic bottle with water. The movement inside the *Asamblea* is frantic. Now there are ten people working, some of whom are setting-up the table – some easels with thick planks on top surrounded by plastic chairs. There are no tablecloths nor plates, just some plastic trays and cutlery that will also serve to facilitate 'take away' once lunch is over. Others run back and forth between the kitchen and the pantry, clean the toilets, check that the mincemeat does not burn in the pan, set up the small pots that will transport the food to the table and make sure everything is ready. At 12.45, the doors open and nearly ninety people come in and sit around the tables, while others approach the counter of the kitchen and leave the containers in which they will take extra food once all those who are present have eaten.

The *Olla* wasn't always like this. Over the years, the *Olla* has not only accommodated the changing needs of the neighbourhood, but it has evolved as new people with new perspectives and experiences continue to join. For instance, in the past the *Asamblea* used to run the *Olla* both on Saturdays and Sundays. But the

10 *Mate* is a popular drink in some parts of South America. It is a type of tea made with the leaves of yerba mate and it is drunk from a gourd with a metal straw. It is usually consumed socially using the same straw and gourd for everyone.

dynamics on both days were very different and Saturday's *Olla* eventually closed, while the people who ran it left. Disagreements about the purpose and meaning of the *Olla* were at the centre of this fallout. Leo, a member of the *Asamblea* who is in his early 60s and works in a transportation cooperative explained to me:

> **Leo**: We didn't want to provide only a plate of food. It was never, never, our goal … Sundays' *Olla* anyway. It was before. Before it was about giving food and that's it, there were no … It was a much more limited thing, more … what's the word? … like social assistance …
>
> **Mónica**: What changed? How did the *Asamblea* change its approach to the *Olla*?
>
> **Leo**: We had to change first. Then we changed the *Asamblea.* We thought we had to change the political stand of the *Olla*, we believed that the plate of food was not enough … it was enough just to fulfill the calorie intake of part of that day, but it wasn't enough for us.
>
> **Mónica**: Where does this different approach come from?
>
> **Leo**: It comes from discussing, discussing among ourselves. It comes from the incorporation of new *compañeros* to the *Olla* who were living in the streets.[11]

It is hard to reconstruct the exact process through which the *Asamblea* decided to change the character of the *Olla*. People with a long history in social work joined the *Asamblea* and tried to promote the *Olla* as a space of belonging for the people in the neighborhood living on the streets, as well as a space for finding collective solutions to individual problems. Guadalupe, a sociologist in her late 20s, makes this clear when she says,

> It is assuming ownership [of the problems], what I think is that whatever we cannot resolve by our own, we should figure it out collectively, I mean, if one guy cannot get food, okay, then we all have to cook, but it is not just 'let's cook together', it's 'hey, the neighborhood also should assume responsibility for the people who live in it or in the city who do not have enough to eat! And it should contribute to it!'

Guadalupe's comment denotes a sense of social responsibility for the existence of poverty that defies dominant approaches to poverty and calls for action. Authoritative poverty knowledge explains poverty as the result of an individual's bad choices or lack of appropriate capabilities for engaging with markets (Lawson

11 The interviews were conducted in Spanish and all translations are mine. All the names are pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted between November, 2013 and March, 2014.

and Middle-Class Poverty Politics Research Group 2012). 'Assuming ownership' instead, points to a relational understanding of poverty in which all social actors are implicated in the production and reproduction of poverty. The *Olla* thus becomes a 'window to the neighbourhood', an opportunity to come closer to people living in very marginal situations, to get to know their needs and to find collective solutions to them. Cecilia, a lawyer in her late 20s recalls the story of Verónica:

> She approached the *Asamblea* through the *Olla*, she started coming to lots of activities and ended up asking for help in relation to the case of her boy, who had been taken away [by the Council for the Rights of Girls, Boys and Teenagers of the city of Buenos Aires]. The relationship with the people who live in the streets then, begins in the *Olla*, they all come through the same door, right? And then, we manage to build a more personal relationship, more like an equal, a relationship of *compañeros*, it's no longer like 'I am the *Asamblea* and you are ... ' We are all part of the same thing.

Even if all the immediate material problems cannot be solved, the *Olla* and the *Asamblea* are thought to be spaces for empowerment. This is clear for Paula, a psychologist in her mid-30s, who says:

> The *Olla* does not solve the hunger problem of people who anyway have other resources to resort to [...] We all know that the plate of food is an excuse, it's like [...] I believe that this way of seeing it, we all share it. What we want is a different relationship with people; to acknowledge them as subjects with rights.

But the nature of the *Olla* and *Asamblea* are more complex than this. At the same time that they 'help' to solve peoples' concrete problems, like the case of Verónica, the *Olla* functions as a space for organising that aspires to incorporate people for whom it would be hard to have a space to belong otherwise. When that happens, when people who live on the streets become more or less regular members of the *Asamblea*, it is seen as a positive step for that person and also for the whole group and its dynamics. In this regard, the *Olla* and *Asamblea* represent a relational space in which material, everyday practices shape the relationships between the people who participate in it as well as the kind of subjectivities that emerge (Conradson 2003a; 2003b; Darling 2011). The relational nature of the *Olla* is expressed in Cecilia's comment:

> The goal of the *Asamblea* is to transform that reality, I mean, intervene in the reality of that person who comes to eat, and that is mutual. I mean, in the sense that I intervene in a homeless person's reality as much as he/she intervenes in mine. It blows your mind!

These 'interventions' in the minds of the *Asamblea* members' happen through sustained interactions, particularly in the *Olla* every Sunday. Thus, as Leo commented in the earlier quote, the arrival of new *compañeros* who bring their own experiences, knowledges, values and expectations, transforms the space by disrupting prevalent assumptions, ways of doing and relations between the members of the *Asamblea* and those who come to the *Olla* to eat (Conradson 2003a). The example of Antonio is particularly telling. Antonio used to live on the streets and joined the *Asamblea* as a result of his participation in the *Olla*. His contribution to changing the character of the *Olla* is acknowledged by everyone I spoke with. Leo recalls a couple of uncomfortable moments in the *Olla*, including when the people who ran it decided to stop serving breakfast and only focus on lunch. Part of the reason had to do with the difficulties of keeping nearly eighty people in the *Asamblea* from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon without violent incidents. The other reason was the exhaustion of the *compañeros* who had been sustaining the *Olla* for years. Another incident happened during the epidemic of influenza, at which time the *Olla* closed its doors and only served food through the window to avoid high concentrations of people in a confined space.

Antonio disagreed with both of those decisions. He believed breakfast should continue and that people must sit down at a table to eat. There were intense conversations and Antonio temporarily abandoned the *Asamblea*. While no one could critique the decision to close the doors of the *Asamblea* during a flu epidemic, what Antonio did with his insistence on keeping the *Asamblea* open was to point to something other than the need to eat. Serving the food through the window in plastic trays was not enough to fulfill those other needs that people bring with them when they come to the *Olla*. In relation to those needs, Paula said,

> Anyone can come to cook and feel part of us and create affective relationships, then what we try to do is to rebuild that person as a subject, not like a thing or like an object [...] for other spaces they are 'assisted', they are 'vagabonds', you get it? They are only the 'beneficiaries' of a program. For us, they are *compañeros* [...]. For me, it's a health issue, in the sense of subjective recognition, working with people so they can feel subjects of rights, so they can apply for their national IDs, ok? So they can choose where to go for lunch because if someone is mistreated in one place, 'you don't have to go there, go somewhere else!'

The appreciation of those situations, which most likely would escape the eye of even the sharpest and most well-intended middle class activist, comes with interacting with those who are in a completely different material and affective situation. This became apparent to me in relation to the '*Olla*'s Magazine' project proposed by César and Verónica. In a meeting where they were not present, Ana, a long-time member of the *Asamblea* whom they brought the proposal to, commented on the style César and Verónica wanted to give to the magazine. They were hoping to create something akin to a tourist guide for homeless people. That is, they thought to include 'where to eat' and 'where to sleep' sections, and also 'where to go' and 'what to do' segments that would provide information about free or affordable cultural activities. Ana pointed to how, with this decision, they

reclaimed their right to leisure, to have fun and to enjoy public space: 'Crazy, eh? Look from where they are looking at it and from where I am!'

It is hard to believe that this would come as a surprise to someone who has extended experience of doing grassroots work. However, it was only visible to Ana once César and Verónica made it explicit. Leo comments,

> That's why we try to incorporate people, that's what we've always wanted [...] it has helped us a lot, it has opened our heads in so many things, like in how we treat, the approach we have on problems, a variety of things that had to do with their daily lives in the streets, that we want to include it on our Sundays.

Thus, incorporating people, working for and with those who live in very different material conditions but who also hold different values, knowledges and appreciations of the world enriches the discussions and adds deeper layers of complexity to the understanding of problems and actions to be taken. Writing about a drop-in center for asylum seekers in England, Darling has pointed to how it is contingent upon 'multiple narratives, practices and notions of acceptable generosity coming into continuous contact and negotiation' (Darling 2011, 415). This is also true for the *Olla*, as we saw in the case of Antonio. Differences in expectations and assumptions about the meaning and purpose of the *Olla* led to Antonio's temporary abandonment of the space but at the same time it forced the activists at the *Olla* to reflect on his concerns. As Leo puts it, 'that really helped us much, it opened our eyes to so many things'.

Learning privilege

I met Marta on a hot summer afternoon in the *Asamblea de Flores*. Marta is a white, middle-aged and middle class woman. She is a housewife married to an engineer and has two children. We sat on one of the patios of the building on the way to the clinic and, as we talked, people kept passing by and greeting Marta. We also got interrupted several times by kids living in the clinic who were playing on the adjacent patio. They kept coming to get some of the snacks that Marta had brought to our meeting. Marta is a teacher in the *Bachillerato Popular*, but she first approached it as a student. She had not graduated from high school. Even though she tried to do it as an adult, she never seemed to find a place where she could fit-in. As a result, she chose to join the *Bachillerato Popular* in order to gain her high-school diploma. However, the day she went to register at the school she was uncomfortable, feeling that the place did not meet her expectations of a school environment, having been based on the occupancy of a building,

> It was really hard for me to understand the meaning of this place [...] My father was a bank clerk and my mother a teacher [...] so it was really hard for me to understand the idea of 'occupying' this space, and I asked to myself 'what am I doing between occupiers?'

'Occupying' a house or any other building has become a common practice in Buenos Aires in the last thirty years (Elías 2005) in the face of the lack of affordable houses for low income populations (Cravino et al. 2002). Overall, the middle class has reacted defensively to this phenomenon, putting in motion a rhetorical strategy that first, sees the poor as being out-of-place in 'modern' Buenos Aires, and later, identifies the usually dark-skinned poor as an illegal immigrant from a neighbouring country. This works to deprive the poor of their right to inhabit urban space (Guano 2004), and in part explains Marta's initial discomfort at encountering this space of occupation. In part, this also draws on a series of values and norms about the 'self-made middle class' that are ingrained in Argentinian society. Marta comments that she was initially skeptical of the occupied space of the *Asamblea* because,

> ... from where I am in terms of the life I have, [poverty] it's not visible! [...] it is not visible because of this position that 'I work my ass off to have a roof over my head, a house, so others should do the same! No social security, no nothing!' You see? There is no such a thing as a right [to a house]. You make your own rights!

As with all the *Bachilleratos Populares*, the school in the *Asamblea* works on the premise that we all have knowledges related to our own experiences and positionalities that are valid and that sharing them with others enriches the collective. This does not mean that there is no structure but rather, as Camila, a teacher in her mid-twenties puts it;

> Beyond the contents that we consider the students should know, we pay attention to how relationships are established here, to make sure the students know they are not only students because we are all equal in this place. And that they can change the way they see themselves and relate to the rest, that they understand their voices occupy a space here.

Unlike 'formal' high schools, it only takes three years to get the degree and the curriculum is very flexible. Most of the time, teachers and students establish the content of the courses together, while class attendance is not supervised and there are no sanctions for not doing homework or for misconduct. As such, the *Bachilleratos Populares* attract a diverse population of adults who could not finish their studies due to work, and also young people who did not fit within the rigid structure of regular educational institutions. Therefore, there is an important diversity in terms of age and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The fact that the *Asamblea* functions in an occupied space and operates through horizontal networks also shapes the dynamics of the *Bachillerato*.[12] For instance, Marta recalled one class in which they had an intense conversation about the occupation, which found her on the side of the legal owners of the property. However, after the discussion, in which there were confrontational opinions, she reflected on the importance of having been able to see, 'the two trays of the justice scale [...] and realizing that both sides were right, but the struggle of this people, the people living in the clinic was much more valid, the owners had bankrupted the clinic and laid off their workers without pay!'

The act of 'seeing', of being able 'to see' something, maybe for the first time, comes up repeatedly in conversations with members of the *Asambleas*. They recognise it as the result of having engaged with people they would not have come into contact with if it were not for the fact that they all share the space of the *Asamblea*. As in the case of Marta, it is an ongoing process of negotiating the meaning of the space they inhabit along with the way they relate to each other. Learning from other's experiences and lives prompts critical reflection about their own identities and histories (Wilson 2014), which enhances the possibility for coexistence and creates affective bonds by working alongside people whom they might not have acknowledged in the past. For instance, Sandra, a housewife in her late thirties and also a student at the *Bachi,* started frequenting the *Asamblea* because she had a friend who invited her to participate in the gender group. In a paper she had to write for class she chose to research life in juvenile detention centres, a reality that some of her peers in the *Bachillerato* had experienced. Regarding that experience, she commented,

> ... maybe in a different situation, you'd look at them and think 'I better cross the street', you follow me? But here you learn to realize here ... to realize they are children who are ... totally unprotected ... unprotected! And I tell you again, this place ... I believe it gives them a hug [...] [the *Asamblea*] teaches you to see beyond what you usually see ... in the sense that we tend to worry about our lives, our problems, our small surrounding and ... you see there are other things ...

Far from being a naïve recognition of the presence and misfortune of those in poverty, these interactions enable a better understanding of vulnerable situations that might not have been so visible in the past, as in the case of Marta's understanding of poverty. At the same time, interactions with difference also allow for the acknowledgment of people's class privilege and pave the way for a shift in their subjectivities (Conradson 2003a; Darling 2011). Working in the *Olla* has proved this to Ana too,

12 Recently the *Asamblea* was awarded the deeds for part of the property.

> ... we always tell them [the people who come to the *Olla*] that we have a view from a place of so much privilege ... that will never be the same ... we will never be, I mean, we all learn from the other, and then you decompress in the sense that ... I don't know how to put it, but it changes you a lot, a lot.

Most of the middle-class people who work in the *Asambleas* do it because they are already challenged and mobilised by a concern for social justice. To some extent, the structural causes of poverty and its relation to their own class privilege is something they grapple with. But even in the cases in which acknowledging privilege is coupled with a commitment to action, sustained work and engagement with people in marginal situations necessarily implies adjustments in perceptions and ideas about what needs to be done and how. For instance, Ana had a very hard time when she started working at the *Olla* because she could not help herself from feeling compassion and suffering for the situation and struggles of the homeless who came to the *Olla*,

> I went from that [laughs], when everything seemed the same, everything seemed the same pain, I lived everything with the same intensity, to start distinguishing: 'ok, this problem is not the same as this one' or ... learning a lot of things ... most of all to be able to transform and collaborate in this sense, in the sense of *transforming things* [my emphasis]. And finding the meaning of it all. Because I wasn't even sure why I started at the *Olla* ... and it was for that. Ultimately, what we want is to find it the way out of a reality that we don't agree with.

In Ana's account, what started as a desire to 'do good' and demonstrate a sense of responsibility toward others (Darling 2011), was gradually given a different meaning thanks to her work in the *Olla*. Ana's homogenising view of the problems and misfortunes of the people who came to eat belied a will to 'help needy others' that might not have the resources to take care of themselves. Far from being a response to 'dutiful citizenship' (Cloke, Johnsen and May 2007), transforming things goes beyond fulfilling needs and 'doing good' in order to engage with changing the circumstances in which those needs emerged in the first place. Recognising and acting upon that reality places Ana, her *compañeros* of the *Asamblea,* and the people who attend the *Olla* in relation to one another as part of a web of interdependencies (Lawson 2007) and political responsibilities that binds society together (Massey 2004).

Conclusion

Through the two case studies, this chapter has focused on the interactions between middle class people and those in very disadvantageous situations as they work together in a shared activity – the soup kitchen in the *Asamblea de Plaza Dorrego-San Telmo* and the education program in *Asamblea de Flores*. The *Asambleas*

are political spaces that seek to embrace diversity and encourage work across class divides, although they are not always free from tensions. Through regular encounters over a long period of time, middle class activists and participants became more aware of their class privilege and questioned their class identities and values as a result.

These stories offer a number of important insights into theories of how prejudice can be overcome (or reproduced). First, working together in a long-term shared project like the *Olla* enabled a gradual processes of awareness among its middle class participants (Wilson 2014). When the *Olla* was set up, more than ten years ago, it mostly worked to fulfil the pressing need for food in the neighbourhood. However, as time went by, the urgency of the food situation decreased and gave way to a more 'relaxed' environment and dynamic. This facilitated opportunities for activists to have more positive interactions with the homeless and to create a space that minimised difference (Johnsen, Cloke and May 2005). Subsequently, some of the homeless that attended the *Olla* in order to eat also started participating more actively in the cooking and, eventually, in the work of the *Asamblea* too. For Leo, this was a key factor in changing their approach to the *Olla* because the incorporation of new *compañeros* like Antonio enriched the discussions with different experiences and points of view.

Matejskova and Leitner (2011) have already stressed the importance of people working together for sustained periods in order to increase empathy. I agree with their assertion and I propose that we should also be aware of the different temporalities of encounters and how they progressively intervene in 'habitual everyday practices' (Valentine and Sadgrove 2012). We can see this clearly through the case of Ana. Her inability to discriminate between different degrees of problems when she first arrived changed over time as she learned that not all poor people's problems were the same. And yet, years later when César and Verónica brought to her the idea of the *Olla*'s magazine she was surprised at the choice of things they wanted to include. In reflecting on their desire to include leisure activities and details of public space in the magazine, Ana was able to consider how César and Verónica's positionalities differed markedly from her own, and how those differences served to shape their expectations of the *Asamblea* and those they met there.

Her example illustrates how awareness and change come gradually through sustained encounters, each of which seems to bring a new perception of difference. It also highlights the difficulties of 'seeing' and 'learning difference' even for people who are already committed to working on social change and breaking down stereotypes and barriers of class. The space of the *Olla* provides a suitable site for tracing gradual change given its repetitive nature (Wilson 2014). As such, engaging in long-term ethnographic work that tracks unfolding, multiple moments of encounter experienced by one person can contribute much to our understanding of how preconceptions and values are challenged.

Secondly, much of the work on encounters has been focused on either casual, everyday encounters in urban space or on projects that are deliberately engineered

to try and engender collaboration across social-cultural difference. I propose that rather than focusing on either one, we can try to think about how the two become intertwined through the everyday practices of the people involved. People approach the *Asambleas* for different reasons. Ana approached the *Asamblea* because she wanted to do something but was not sure what or why. Leo came with a long story of activism and made a conscious decision to join the political project of the *Asamblea*. But other people got involved to fulfil a more individualistic need. Marta initially wanted to get her high-school diploma but having received it, decided to stay and teach in the *Bachi* and Sandra was motivated as a result of her friendship with an existing participant. In this sense, Lawson and Elwood (2014) argue that the same space might enable very different kinds of encounter simultaneously. All encounters are shaped by people's positionality in relation to their class, race and gender, to which I would also add their preconceptions about that space. I want to further this argument by proposing that we also need to pay attention to how these spaces are constantly changing. We should think about spaces of encounter themselves, including the *Asambleas*, as fluid, dynamic and open. They are continually being produced and changed by the encounters they enable and as such will continue to evolve as new moments and modes of encounter emerge.

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