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[Self-organization, Integration and Homeless People](#)

Ana Inés Heras

<http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2014/10/27/self-organization-integration-and-homeless-people/>

Some people are stigmatized as excluded, marginalized, the poor, extreme poor people, homeless and helpless, and other categories with which western capitalist societies tend to label the living situation of people who do not conform to common sense patterns of the market economy. [Palleres \(2004\)](#) has documented that over time, people living on the streets are signified as lacking (a home or shelter, abilities to work, capacity to conform to the norm). It is very seldom that what people living on the streets know and can do is documented, analyzed and interpreted in key of contribution. Many of the so called excluded, marginalized and homeless, however, have been developing a collective position of their own, and a critical thinking process about their living experience which, in turn, informs the conceptualization of self-management, collective decision-making and social solidarity economy. In this post I will show some of these processes and reflect on their contributions in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The [Espacio Carlos Mugica](#) are a collective group composed of people who live on the street and by organizations that support people who live on the street. Its main purpose is to participate in the design, implementation and assessment of public policy to protect the rights those who live on the streets.



Matías Burin Heras holds pamphlets while helping to build conciousness

Funded in 2012, this collective of organizations was built taking into account the work of another network (la Red en la Calle) which existed between 2010 and 2012, and whose main purpose was to help put together a law specifically directed to protect homeless people´s rights.

However, as documented by [Ávila, Palleres, Colantoni and Sangroni \(2014\)](#), both the Red and the Espacio, as organizations, bring together a prior history of attempts to self-organize and reclaim the voice of those who live on the street. According to these authors, the 2001 crisis in Argentina aggravated the situation of people who were at the verge of supporting their lives within the market economy, and many of them lost their jobs, their homes and drastically changed their daily living

patterns. However, it was during those years (2001-2003) that, simultaneously, a process of direct political organization started.



Photo Courtesy by IAEC (María Eva)

In this way, paradoxically, the same crisis that pushed thousands of people to the streets was the scenario in which self-organization, direct decision making and political horizontal participation made possible specific collective practices by homeless people. As early as 2003-2004, people living on the streets started to organize by establishing a meeting point in the city of Buenos Aires, where, weekly, they would discuss their issues and find ways of taking action, collectively. Primarily, their actions were geared towards supporting their lives (food, shelter, health), yet very soon, they focused on issues of public policy.

It was out of this process that one specific organization called [Proyecto 7](#) started to advocate for the rights of street people. This organization sustained their work over the years, and recently started to self-manage an [Integration](#) Center. This is the first organization, world wide, self-managed by homeless men.

Anthropologist Palleres (2004) documented that in Argentina, prior to 2004 didn't exist an organization conducted by people living on the street, a phenomenon that was found in other parts of the world; she documented that *Proyecto 7* is the first in kind for Argentina.

As documented elsewhere (Pagotto and Heras, 2014 a) the *Espacio Mugica* has been able to put to debate a specific way of conceptualizing what counts as support when it comes to understanding the situation of people who live on the street. Support, for this collective of organizations, is defined as a frame of reference in which people network with other people in order to take care of themselves at the same time they advocate for their rights. This conceptual frame is different than the one most prevalent in public policy, oriented towards defining people who live on the streets as people who can't organize, nor participate in public policy decision-making processes (Heras and Pagotto, 2014). In this manner, support, self-organization, and advocacy are pillars of a way of conceiving political participation by people who currently live on the streets. Additionally, the *Espacio Mugica* has also emphasized that one of the ways in which this conceptual frame is put to work is by exchanging knowledge among the different organizations that network together and by critically examining their practice (Pagotto y Heras, 2014 b).



Photo Courtesy by IAEC (María Eva)

These orientations are also held by other organizations, such as the [Isauro Arancibia Educational Center](#) (IAEC hereafter) or the [Herman@s de Calle](#). The IAEC started their work during 1998, prior to the big 2001 economic and political Argentinean crisis, aimed at supporting the educational process of children, youth and adults for whom the public school system failed. The teachers who funded the IAEC started noticing that such student population was —for the most part— living on the streets. These teachers advocated for the public school system to allow for a specific educational center that would work with a critical pedagogy approach and foster schooling for this specific population. Over the years they organized as a self-managed public school.

In turn, their educational practice supported youth attending the IAEC to conform their own organization (Herman@s de Calle). They started to work as a group during 2014, and their main goal is to design and implement a collective housing project. Meanwhile they have networked to contest a governmental decision to demolish their school, since the IAEC is now housed in a building that is under dispute (the current Buenos Aires administration is arguing to tear it down in order to modernize the transportation system).

What is original about Herman@s de calle is that it is an organization composed by young people, it starts out within an educational project, and it is geared towards re-thinking the issue of housing from a collective, cooperative perspective.

I end on a reflective note, posed as rhetorical questions: Could it be that those who seem to be out of the system are contributing to push our thinking about the system all together? Is it that they are proposing us to practice a different way of living, one based on the collective good? And finally, what can we identify when we look at the importance of combining support with self-organization and advocacy for all? May this be an important contribution by those who seem to have nothing?

Ana Inés Heras earned her MA and PhD in Education (1995) with a Fulbright Scholarship at UCSB. She also studied History and Physical Education at the undergraduate level in Argentina. She currently studies participants' collective learning processes at autonomous, self-managed organizations in contemporary Argentina, focusing on how diversity is understood in such processes.