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Child labour in the urban informal economy of a Latin American border region

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Abstract. The article describes the phenomenon of child labour in the informal urban economy of a region known as the Triple Frontier located between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, where some of the worst forms of child labour with distinctive regional features are present. At the Triple Frontier, tensions between global and local dimensions shape an interconnected and diverse space marked by inequality and asymmetries. For children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, border cities offer an opportunity to establish an income for themselves or their families through economic activities in the urban informal sector. However, the convergence of three national states, along with the sheer length and porousness of borders in the region, also allows the persistence of the worst forms of child labour, including trafficking for sexual or labour exploitation.

Even though the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by almost every country in the world, the extent of their compliance varies greatly. Historically there have been (at least) two types of childhood: that with a guarantee of inclusion in traditional socialisation mechanisms and excluded childhood, where the rights of children are not guaranteed. In the latter case, children will have a different recognition of their rights depending on their socioeconomic background. In the Triple Frontier region, poverty is criminalised, and children from vulnerable backgrounds would be subject to criminal law enforcement to the detriment of the rights established in the Convention.

The article focuses on how working children inhabit and appropriate urban space in order to maximise economic opportunity while at the same time minimising considerable risks. The voices of working children are also included, as they are fundamental for understanding child labour as a strategy to deal with social precariousness.

Keywords: child labour, Triple Frontier, informal economy, exploitation, children's rights.

Introduction

The Triple Frontier region, where Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay converge, is a place marked by pronounced contrasts and intense regional and international cross-border mobility. This mobility is facilitated by multiple factors, including tourism, commerce, and work. For children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, the border provides an opportunity to capitalise on economic asymmetries and establish an income either for themselves or their families through economic activities in the urban informal sector. However,

the convergence of three national states, along with the sheer length and porousness of borders in the region, also allows the persistence of the worst forms of child labour, including trafficking for sexual or labour exploitation. This article focuses on child labour in the informal economy with its distinctive regional features. For my doctoral thesis, entitled “Child Labour and Exploitation in the Triple Border between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay” (University of Buenos Aires, 2018), I did field work in the region, making observations and conducting interviews with children, which served as a basis for this analysis.

Considerations about child labour

As a theoretical concept, child labour can have multiple meanings, each of which entails different practical consequences. For this reason, prior to analysing its forms in the region, it is important to briefly describe what is understood by this term. Bibliographic review and field work conducted in the region have shown that there is no consensus about what child labour is and is not. Each state, along with its regulatory framework, as well as each national and international agency and even each social actor interprets this notion differently.

Historically, the definitions of what constitutes child labour have been driven by different political and ideological perspectives. Within this plurality, states and international agencies established certain criteria aimed at eradicating those forms of child labour considered “intolerable”. Although fundamental for diagnosing problems, recommending action and evaluating “good practices,” the procedures for the identification and eradication of child labour are grounded in a Eurocentric concept of childhood, family and society. For this reason, the criteria, mostly established in Europe after WWII, are not always practical in other contexts, or their application is more challenging.

Child labour is largely defined by its context, which determines its form and facilitates its practice. As different societies have followed different economic, political and cultural paths, the context may vary greatly, rendering the introduction of a single criterion unfeasible. In this case, we discuss child labour in a peripheral region of the global system, where informal economy and social precariousness are rampant. For this region, the introduction of labour flexibility measures advised by the Washington Consensus in the 1990s marked a turning point. Currently, the trend shows no signs of reversal; on the contrary, the ILO (Global Employment Trends 2020) has warned about the deterioration of employment conditions for women and young people and a potential increase in informality due to “growing generation of lower-quality employment.” In Latin America, child labour is inseparable from the general precariousness of the labour market; since the salary earned from adult employment is often insufficient, children must seek additional sources of income. Therefore, child labour is frequently a resistance strategy against job insecurity and poverty.

Following Castel (Castel 2015), we understand job insecurity to be a trend towards greater job instability, increasingly restricted access to social security and the persistence of low wages. This trend results from employment being compromised as

a means of guaranteeing the exercise of other social rights: education, housing and health. Complementing this aspect, the historical development of the notion of child labour can help elucidate how it came to be considered to be natural and inevitable in certain contexts. As a consequence, acceptance of the inevitability of child labour led to tolerance toward it or even resignation, resulting in insufficient or non-existent detection and prevention mechanisms.

Distinctive features of the Triple Frontier area between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay

In order to understand the practices that take place in the Triple Frontier area, a brief description of the region is required. This border region includes the cities of Foz do Iguazú in Brazil, Ciudad del Este in Paraguay and Puerto Iguazú in Argentina, along with vast rural areas. Its surface area is approximately 2500 km². In this zone, the Iguazú River meets the Paraná River, forming the borders between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina.

This area has a distinctive dynamic that is the object of study of various disciplines, each viewing the Triple Frontier from their individual perspectives. But the region cannot be encapsulated in a single view, since its dynamic character renders any attempt to construct a static representation futile.

However, a description of the Triple Frontier is necessary, since its features directly influence the local child labour nature. Some analyses emphasise the region’s harmony and unity; others, the asymmetries, inequality and risks involved in free movement across borders. The most realistic interpretation probably lies somewhere in between these dramatic extremes.

In Puerto Iguazú, the Argentine city where field work was conducted, inequality manifests itself in the existence of two opposing dynamics, one in the centre and the other in the peripheries. This segregation is the expression of an economic crisis, but also of an urban one, of the city as a public space where working children are the visible faces of economic, gender, ethnic and housing disparities.

To understand the dynamics of everyday life in the region, discussing salaried work is necessary. Among the classical theorists of sociology, both Marx and Weber considered this concept key to their notion of capitalism. Regardless of the legal and contractual nuances, the essential point both authors make is that people who do not possess capital derive income from the sale of their labour.

In Puerto Iguazú and many urban centres of Latin America, the deterioration of the labour

market is evident in the high unemployment rates and abundance of informal and temporary work (Fig. 1). The resultant social precariousness makes it difficult to develop a life plan, since people's decisions are primarily driven by immediate needs. Additionally, for the many young people who are unable to finish primary or secondary education, job options are even more limited, forcing them to resort to precarious and poorly paid jobs. Employment in the tourism industry, which the most developed in the region, requires specialised knowledge, so many of these vacancies are filled by personnel from other cities or countries invited by the numerous luxury hotels.



Fig. 1. The Triple Border area between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay¹

Urban informal economy

The urban informal sector comprises a wide range of activities, some of which are obvious and visible, as they take place in public spaces. Despite this fact, children who work in the streets seem

¹ Image: "The Triple Border area between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina, with the location of the cities of Foz do Iguacu and Cascavel (Brazil), Ciudad del Este (Paraguay) and Puerto Iguazú (Argentina)." Available via license: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

to remain invisible to most of the people navigating these urban spaces.

The skills developed by working children, which are vastly different from those developed in more structured spaces, are not recognised, either. However, the children involved in the urban informal sector do have knowledge and skills of varying complexity, including division of labour, territorial allocation, cooperation and other strategies aimed at maximising the benefits the public space offers and at the same time minimising the risks it introduces.

The voices of working children

The Triple Frontier region, marked by asymmetries, diversity, and inequality, also offers multiple opportunities to capitalise on the convergence of three national states. Higher-end tourists, mostly Europeans or North Americans who come by the thousands to admire Iguazú Falls, are a source of income for working children. Investigation into children's perspectives is necessary for understanding how they deal with social precariousness and resist adversity and numerous forms of violence which are only too characteristic of local impoverished childhood.

In their narratives, the children make references to their economic situation; however, far from being the only topic, it is rarely even the main one, since violence, police harassment, school, family and the municipal Day Care Centre also play central roles in their everyday life.

Here, these aspects are presented through the testimonies of Lionel, Sebastián, Natalia and Ezequiel.²

At the time of the interview, Lionel was twelve and lived with his nuclear family; his father was unemployed and was receiving the **Universal Child Allowance** for Social Protection (AUH, Spanish acronym³)

Lionel has six brothers, and he is, in his words, "more or less the middle one."

When I asked him what his little brothers did, he replied that he had "no idea" (whether or not they attended school, etc.), because he was "not at home all day." Lionel worked during the day and went to night school. He used to attend school in the afternoon, "but he had problems" and was transferred to the night classes. Regarding these "problems," he said: "I was embarrassed because I was entering the sixth grade but I didn't pass the exams and I had to repeat the grade. I didn't

² All names have been changed.

³ Implemented in Argentina in 2009 as a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Program aimed at children and adolescents younger than 18 years old living in poverty or vulnerable situations.

like that everyone was in the other grade, and I was the only one who didn't pass."

Sebastián was a thirteen-year-old Paraguayan who lived with his aunt in Puerto Iguazú, Argentina. Sometimes he would go to Paraguay ("I just cross here by boat, but it's difficult because the current goes the other way") where his uncle and his father lived (he did not mention his mother). They knew that he lived in Argentina. When I asked him if he would like to return to Paraguay, Lionel said that he did not want to go back, and that he even got his ID in Argentina.

Ezequiel was fifteen and lived with his grandmother, his uncle, his aunt, and a cousin. He was born in Buenos Aires, but "was taken" to the province of Misiones when he was eight years old because of a violent episode in which his stepfather killed his mother: "We all became orphans, the four of us. There were five of us, my brother died in my mother's belly" (she was seven months pregnant). Ezequiel was first placed in a group home and then taken to his grandmother's house. Regarding his siblings, he commented that his younger brother lived with him, that his older brother "got hooked on drugs" and his sister, with whom he had almost no contact, lived with her husband and their daughter.

Natalia was eleven years old and lived with her aunt, uncle and cousin. She said she had "like eight or nine siblings. There are two who died; one of them died when she came from the river, she was bitten by a bug. Another died from hepatitis." Natalia had been living with her uncle since her father had died; she said she got along well with her mother (who lived "three houses away") but not with her stepfather, who seemed to be a violent person: "The other day my stepfather hit my brother Rafael (6 years old) and my older brother hit my stepfather. The day before yesterday he hit my brother, and my older brother came out to defend him and hit my stepfather, and my mother got angry and told him to go to the room, and they've been fighting until now."

I asked her if her stepfather hit her and she answered: "No, he doesn't hit me because everyone defends me. My whole family, everyone is going to get him, my uncle *Piti*, my uncle *Leo*, my auntie *Caro*, my uncle that I live with, they are all going to go against him if he touches me."

Physical violence permeates Natalia's narrative, even when she talks about her expectations for her future; she told me that she would like to have children "but not a husband, because they are bad." And added with determination: "They won't hit me, I'll hit them first." I asked her if she knew of such a situation, and she answered: "Yes. My uncle always

hits my aunt Carola. Because she goes out, drinks beer and she is with different men and my uncle gets angry. Almost every day is like this."

Regarding economic activities, Ezequiel worked on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, from midnight to six in the morning, at a hamburger stand located in the central area of the city.

When asked how he started working on the cart, he said: "I knew my employer from before. And when I no longer wanted to look after cars (*cuidacoches*⁴), there was a fat guy who sells hot dogs and I worked as his assistant. He is very fat, and he kept the money in his apron pocket, and sometimes it fell out, but since I am trustworthy, I would always pick up the money and give it back to him".

Since then, he was left alone in the cart, which was what he preferred: "I don't like it when my boss is there. I don't like his presence. He works his way; each one works their way. When I arrive at work, I sometimes can't find things, everyone keeps them in different places".

Ezequiel began to work at the age of eight, when he arrived at Puerto Iguazú, because he preferred to be on the street rather than at his aunt's house: "I didn't like being at her house. I still don't like it today." In the beginning he spent the nights downtown "looking after cars" (*cuidacoches*), until he got the job in the "carrito" hamburger stand: "You don't earn more, but it's better, it's safer".

I asked him if it was dangerous to be a *cuidacoches* and he replied: "You are surrounded by drugs... Surrounded by all the druggies, drunks... grown-ups... There I learned to do things... Smoking was normal, marihuana, *rock*... I know because my uncles smoke... It's a round aluminium... When you buy food that comes in an aluminium tray, it comes wrapped like this. I only saw it, it has the colour of cheese".

This "rock" was also mentioned by Sebastián and Lionel. When I asked what effects it produced, Sebastián replied: "You feel like stealing, entering someone else's house... Stealing clothes, sneakers... Or you calm down, smoke and you look at people... just look at people." I asked if it was easy to get drugs and Lionel said: "Yes, you can get them over there" (pointing to some shanties by the river).

From his time working as a *cuidacoches*, Ezequiel remembered the fights "between the drunks outside the bar" and that there were "many Brazilians and foreigners from other places... Sometimes they

⁴ In the Triple Frontier area and throughout Argentina, it is a common practice for a driver parking their car to be approached by a person in the street who claims to keep watch over the vehicles in the area in exchange for money. This money is somewhere in between a tip, a payment and an extortion. This informal "occupation" is known as a *cuidacoches*.

would go out alone, totally drunk and the other boys would take them into the dark and left them with only their ID and their keys.” I asked again, to be sure that I understood correctly, whether the guys who looked after cars stole from tourists and he replied: “but they left them their ID and their keys.”

He told me that he “only did that once” and that he also “did other things.” I did not inquire too much into these “other things,” but on another occasion he told me how frequent the abuse of children who looked after cars was (sometimes by the “tourists” themselves) and how they themselves joked about it with those who were victims of this abuse. Behind these “jokes” lies pain, helplessness and vulnerability of children who are the victims of an asymmetrical power situation where their last resort seems to be to pretend that it does not matter, that it was not really a big deal.

This attitude toward abuse was not found in Ezequiel alone. One afternoon I was in the Day Care Centre for children in Puerto Iguazú. The busiest hours had passed, and I was sitting near a ping-pong table. Two little girls had a match that ended in a heated discussion about the final score and who was the winner. When the score was finally settled, the girl who lost snapped at the winner: “At least they didn’t rape me while I was looking after cars.”

For their part, Lionel and Sebastián worked as *cuidacoches* at the entrance of a busy downtown bar during the weekends, all night long: “We’re there until sun-up.” They told me that there were mostly Brazilian and Paraguayan tourists there, and about the “payment system”:

Lionel: “I charge ten *reais*⁵ for each car. Ten *reais* for each car and we take care of about twenty. But sometimes they are tight-fisted and just leave without paying...”

Sebastián: “It makes you angry...”

Lionel: “Or they tell you they have no change.”

Me: “You work there alone or with someone else?”

Lionel: “There are seven of us who take care of the part outside and three of us who take care of the inside...” (that being the parking lot of the bar, and “the part outside” being a public road).

Me: “And you don’t have problems with other boys?”

Lionel: “We already know them all...”

Me: “Are there any girls with you?”

Lionel: “There was a girl... Alina... But she was taken to another city, to a shrink, an orphanage... something like that.”

Me: “Why? What happened to Alina?”

Lionel: “Her mother abused her, hit her and her little sister. She has two little sisters, the three of them left...”

Me: “Do you also get hit?”

Lionel: “When I was younger all the time, now not so much.”

Me: (I kept thinking about Alina) “What did they do to her?”

Lionel: “(absentmindedly) She was raped... (back to the subject that interests him) There is not one bar only, there are seven or eight... So we can work in many places...”

On more than one occasion, the issue of abuse, rape and violence appeared in the speech of children as something so normal, so common, as to be laid aside easily.

In the case of the *cuidacoches*, their strategy is to divide the workplace by blocks or spaces as in the case of the bar (“inside” and “outside”) to avoid tension and conflicts.

Sometimes tensions arise when other children want to work or “invade” the space previously assigned to those who have spent the most time there, or “own” the space for other reasons. Such territorial division is a common strategy of children who work, and often live, in the street. All of them agree on the abundance of violence, drugs, alcohol, harassment from the police when they work downtown, looking after cars at night. These are some of the reasons for the preference of working in the parking lot in the case of Lionel and Sebastián and in the *carrito* in the case of Ezequiel.

Natalia also worked as a *cuidacoches* during the day in the area surrounding the Puerto Iguazú Hospital, along with her little brothers. She did this between the ages of seven and ten, at which point her mother began to receive the Universal Child Allowance (AUH), and in Natalia’s words, “I now collect my salary and I no longer have to work.” Natalia uses the money to buy food (“The food in my house is not very good”). Regarding work, she remembered that “people were very good, they gave me everything in *reais*.” In addition to receiving the AUH, she told me that she stopped working because “the teacher says that you shouldn’t work in the street because bad things can happen to you.” I asked her if “something bad happened to her” and she only replied: “Bad things happen to many people.”

Another aspect of the daily life of children who work in the street is violence and harassment by security forces, mostly when the children are working but also when they are returning home in the early morning hours, or just walking down the street. Inconsistent application of law and

⁵ Reais: Brazilian currency.

disciplinary mechanisms depending on the socio-economical background of people is standard in the region.

When asked about the behaviour of the police, Sebastián said: “They take you to the police station, they leave you for there for a few hours, they ask you everything, where do you live, what is your name... Then they take you home. Sometimes they kick you, like that, with their boots.”

The police often chase after the children when they are working, “but we hide behind the cars. Or we run into the bush, there is so much jungle here.” Ezequiel added excitedly: “He (Sebastián) hunted a *coati*⁶ here in the bush.”

I ask them if, in view of these considerations, they would prefer to look after cars during the day and they told me that “during the day there are many people. I ran into my teacher several times. Nobody sees you at night.”

In other words, warnings given by adults — in this case, a teacher — with good intentions had a paradoxical consequence. The boys continued to work but at the time when “nobody is there,” that is to say, during the night, when that “nobody” takes the form of the police, tourists, drunks, and drug users.

They told me that on one occasion after work, at dawn, Sebastián was arrested and the police “took all his money.” I asked why they did that and he said, “Because we are *minors*”, as if this was a sufficient explanation. Sebastian commented that the police only hit him once when he was walking early in the morning. In his words, a police officer “grabbed his baton and hit me back here (*pointing to his leg*). He asked where I was going, I told him I was going to my aunt’s, but he took me to the police station... He asked my name and I told him a different name... I am not going to give him my name just like that! Then he took me home, but I didn’t want him to know where I live, so I just ran into the bush.”

When I told them that the police *should not* hit them or harass them physically or verbally, they looked at me with a mixture of astonishment and disbelief. I immediately thought that my comment was useless, since our perceptions of the world are mostly based on our experiences, on what our reality and our life trajectories are, and not on what they *should be* or what the law states they should be — the latter is even less important. Here, the children’s reactions could be explained by the almost non-existent boundaries between legal and illegal practices and the general ineffectiveness of the laws.

Ezequiel told me that although in his current work he had no problems with the police (“They even buy me hamburgers”) he did think that “the police here are shit, they hit whoever they want.” He added: “When I was 10 years old, they detained me and put me in jail because I was a minor and was walking down the street in the night... They hit you where it won’t leave a mark. They hit you with sticks on your belly, they leave you... (*makes a gesture like falling unconscious*)” Ezequiel was taken to the police station several times, but he said “he didn’t care” because he preferred to go out and look after cars rather than be at his aunt’s house.

Ezequiel was labelled as “difficult” by some adults (social workers, psychologists, teachers) but there are many factors to consider in his life trajectory: the death of his mother, the separation from his siblings, the moves from one province to another and from one home to another, the exposure to the “street” and the “night,” the fact that even a police station was preferable to being at his aunt’s house. In light of all this, what does it mean to be “difficult”? How can we adults label children who went through extremely difficult situations so casually?

To conclude these notes, I want to share some ideas about the previously mentioned Day Care Centre of Puerto Iguazu, a place that children in extremely precarious situations attend to eat, study, play and practice sports, among other activities. This space is extremely important for restoring their status as “children” in the time they spend there. In pointing out this need for being childlike, I do not wish to equate childhood to weakness or passivity; on the contrary, children are active subjects capable of instituting practices based on the hegemonic understanding of cultural values and of “socially accepted” patterns of thought and behaviour. However, I would like to highlight the role of the Day Care Centre as a physical and symbolic space that facilitates behaviours that transcend mere survival. Here children do not have to worry about being physically assaulted, mistreated, robbed, or whether or not they are going to eat that day. This relief is, both on a physical and mental level, crucial for children exposed to violence at their houses and in the streets where they work.

Natalia said that she liked to go to the Day Centre very much and described a regular day: “Right when I get there, I go play on the swings and then we have breakfast. Then we talk, teachers tell us jokes, stories... Then we go to the classroom, and we do the homework or watch movies, or play games... I like playing Duck, Duck Goose.”

Lionel and Sebastián said that they liked “everything” they did at the Day Centre. I asked them

⁶Coati: either of two tropical American mammals related to raccoons but with a longer body and tail and a long flexible snout.

if they had workshops, if they learned things and Lionel said: “Yes, we have handicraft workshops; we make bracelets, little trees... Some bracelets are super cool, I know how to make two different types, I thought it would be difficult, but it is very easy, the first time I tried I already could make it. And with the teacher Inés we made some vases, we painted them with acrylic, last Friday we made... We made rugs with pieces of T-shirts, we cut them all. We do everything, it is not just one thing, there are lots of things.”

Sebastian mentioned that “we are going to go to Posadas [a nearby city] to play football with other boys” and added enthusiastically: “We are going to travel *at night!*”

Final remarks

Child labour has little or no social recognition in formal institutions. However, it is a strategy of resistance against poverty and implies solidarity and cooperation, through which children build their identity and a sense of belonging that for various reasons they cannot obtain in other spaces such as family or school.

Among the causes of this indifference towards child labour is the persistence of an adult-centred perspective that does not consider the legitimacy of children’s discourse; it is evident in social policies and in programs that, although aimed at guaranteeing children’s rights, do not incorporate their voices, their perception of the world and their own experiences.

More than thirty years after the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the voices of children continue to be silenced, and the “irregular situation” concept persists. Children and adolescents are still, especially in impoverish regions, considered “minors” that the State should discipline and control.

There are many ways to destroy childhood. Child labour is one of them, and perhaps one of the worst. However, in the rural areas of peripheral regions it is considered normal and even desirable for children to work from a very young age. The same occurs in lower classes, with girls involved in domestic work from an early age. In some cases, adults argue that child labour acts as training “for the adult labour market,” which is why they believe it to be more important than formal education. But viewing child labour as formative supports the notion that childhood, following its social and economic background, should remain in a subordinate position in the productive structure of society.

As Pahl points out, the tendency to see child labour as something “natural” may come in part from the idea that all people should be productive, an idea typical of pre-modern subsistence economies in which all members of the family had to participate in productive activities (Pahl 1984). Today this idea persists, justifying child labour in the impoverished areas on the periphery of the world system.

Another justification for child labour has to do with a biased interpretation of children’s agency. Although the strategies children implement to resist poverty require quite advanced knowledge, I do not think that child labour may be claimed to be “chosen freely” by the boys and girls who are involved in it. There is no freedom of choice if the alternative is poverty and hunger suffered by a large part of the population of Latin American countries. As long as the society enables child labour as a way of dealing with poverty, social precariousness and the breakdown of social and family ties, child labour will continue to exist, facilitated by state neglect, a lack of prevention programs, and ultimately the persistence of a system that only sees people as consumers.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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