

# Narrating Organisational Story: Buenos Aires' *Fabricas Recuperadas*<sup>1</sup>

Katarzyna Kosmala\*  
Faculty of Business and Creative Industries  
University of the West of Scotland, UK  
Email: [katarzyna.kosmala@uws.ac.uk](mailto:katarzyna.kosmala@uws.ac.uk)

Miguel Imas  
Faculty of Business and Law  
Kingston University, UK  
Email: [J.Imas@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:J.Imas@kingston.ac.uk)

The practice seems to yield at least this hard lesson: a story is not a story until it is told;  
it is not told until it is heard,  
it changes – and becomes open to the beauties and frailties of more change;  
or a story is not a story until it changes

Della Pollock<sup>2</sup> 2006, p.93

## Abstract

This paper posits a process of narrating as a dialogical storytelling, illustrated here as a tale of socio-economic survival in *Fabricas Recuperadas*.

*Fabricas Recuperadas* refer to abandoned bankrupt businesses that were recovered at the time of the crisis in Argentina by workers themselves, recreating alternative organizing practices such as an elimination of the management structure. This paper draws on insight from ethnographic research in *Fabricas Recuperadas* based in Buenos Aires, revealing the self-construction processes of workers' identities in the context of crisis alongside the accounts of reclaiming their workplaces. The paper offers methodological insights into narrating interpretive research in relation to other cultural and language-based contexts.

The story is an attempt to re-territorialise the crisis experience, bringing local perspective into the narrative.

**Key words:** *Fabricas Recuperadas*, narrative method, organization storytelling

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\*Corresponding author

<sup>1</sup> Please do not quote without consultation of the authors.

<sup>2</sup> Pollock, D (2006) Performance Trouble. In D. S. Madison and J. Hamera (Eds) *The Sage Book of Performance Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## Introduction

The economic debacle of 2001 in Argentina has been represented predominantly through macro-economic lens and political discourses, driven by foreign interest, imposing solutions dressed in the market rationale. Such representation reflects the ‘global’ business sense and dominant corporate strategies that have not addressed the crisis experience from more local perspectives. As a consequence, the processes of constructing meanings about working lives emerge out of epistemology that prioritise the supremacy of the market, legitimised under the socio-political model of Western rational organisation.

The paper challenges representations based on assumptions of making sense of current political and economic equivocal ties in the Western academy with the recent economic crisis of Argentina, and globally, by emphasizing a need for hybrid tonality and re-territorialisation of the peripheral. We argue that intersecting of local voices potentially reverses the ontological control of representing and results in weaving a tapestry of meanings about the crisis experiences, making also explicit what is unheard, suppressed and/or silenced. Furthermore, such an approach facilitates methodological reflections on how we can narrate and represent, through research, the lives of others; negotiating in this process our own positions and sensibilities associated with our professional roles in the academy and beyond and our multiple roles and identities.

The paper offers methodological reflection on positioning of narratives through interpretive research. This paper posits the process of narrating as a dialogical storytelling, illustrated here as a tale of survival in *Fabricas Recuperadas*. In particular we attempt to advance Bakhtin’s dialogical approach to problematise narrativity and construction processes of organizational narratives. We also reflect on possibilities to reposition the notion of storytelling in organizations more generally, located largely in the Weickian tradition, into a methodological hybridisation based on inclusion of poetic methods (Shotter, 1992; Cunliffe, 2002), dialogism (Bakhtin, 1986) and ‘story fabric’ (Boje 2005; 2008). Such repositioning can possibly result in representation that evokes responses and promotes alternative reflections about organizational lives. The story of *Fabricas Recuperadas* is an illustrative attempt towards such repositioning. In the narrative, the examples of actual experiences of crisis can be heard through hybrid tonality, as a result of blurring global and local knowledge constructions, weaving what can be referred to a living story.

## Dialogical Turn in Narrating Stories

At the beginning there was a word. When we have words, we need to find the ways to weave them together into good stories. Good stories are memorable stories, including good organizational stories. Good stories evoke emotion and fantasy, potentially seen as powerful devices in management of meaning and the diffusion of organizational knowledge. Yet, management discourse represents a set of Western-dominant academic theories produced within the context of socially legitimised public institutions which are themselves effects of primary organising processes of a particular dominant narrative; a socially ‘organised’ body of knowledge claims (Weiskopf & Willmott, 1997), and a certain repertoire of words. Henceforth, once we accept to follow any of the managerial models in management theory that circulate in the globalise world, we risk simply projecting the discourses generated within the legitimate institutions onto those we observe and analyse (Chia, 1994).

A process of narrating in such context becomes an act of upon those we observe, by further defining action and behaviour in terms of a particular organisational model selected.

Chia (1995) suggests that we can achieve more by understanding these theoretical postures as ontological gestures, in a bringing forth of reality to the exclusion of other possible voices. It is in the act of deconstructing organisational discourses that opens up space to render a story more dialogic. Precisely, we argue that such realisation requires a commitment of the researcher, a commitment of making sense of other possible realities, of making our stories - their stories. A story can emerge out of a discursive device that generates and sustains meanings and produces texts; become a living story composed of here-and-now narratives as well as ante-narratives. Despite the fact that living stories can be told in and about organizations, and despite that these stories may appear as not fitting the officially prescribed organizational narrative (Boje, 2008), they appear important in disseminating emergent knowledge that challenges dominant establish discourse. These living stories that do not fit, form a part of a web of unfolding relationships. We follow on Boje's insistence that most organizational stories are co-created by many participants and based on multiple meanings. We argue that for such stories to unfold, commitment is paramount in sense making of narrating process. How can we narrate the story that emerges out of commitment of making sense of other possible realities?

It is here that a Bakhtinian reading of dialogism can contribute to advancing understanding on how commitment can be created or to be more specific co-created. For Bakhtin, we constitute ourselves in dialogical relationships with others (Bakhtin, 1986; Todorov, 1984), potentially aspiring to an open-ended dialogue (Gardiner, 1992). Words, Bakhtin (1986) argued, are at the centre of our experiences and existence. We need words for a story to emerge. Words are uttered expressions of meanings in a continuous chain of ceaseless dialogues, feeding their content from our reservoir of behaviours and ideologies (Gardiner, 1992; Dentith, 1996). We envisage narrating as a process that emerges from the dialogical instances, shaped in a participative dialogue. It is a process that reflects different ideological forces at work, between the official and unofficial languages. Researching organizations and narrating organizational lives is equally part of the never-ending dialogical instance in-between researchers and organisational actors, and in-between researchers, who ultimately recreate in their discourses the voices of the organisations and its members. A dialogical sense making incorporates both a commitment to listening and being heard as well as interpretations that emerge in a dialogue. In other words, the research requires a commitment, contributing to a reflexive understanding of the social world (of the organisational world) and of one's location within it, encouraging to transcend the perceived threat of otherness, the perceived threat of moving beyond the boundaries of the established and the establishment (the academy).

As researchers we need to recognise being situated and mediated through the operation of dense and conflicting networks of discourses, cultural and social practices, and institutional structures, bound up in the intricate phenomenology of the *self-other* relationship (Gardiner, 1992). Recognition of such position opens up a space where commitment and interpretation for making sense of organizations stories becomes dialogic. We can recognise from such a place that something denoted as an organisation exists through these dense networks of discourses, of cultural and social practices reflected in the relationships of individual members, at the different levels. Henceforth, this process, by its very nature, does not reflect singular events, being fundamentally historical, continuous and mobile, which is why, following Bakhtinian thought, is unfinished, and decentred. Communication in the research process thus can be conceptualised as co-creation process of commune with others. In the case of *Fabricas Recuperadas*, a tale unfolds as a co-authored texted with the workers; the self appointed agents of change.

### **Methodological Reflections on Narrating Interpretive Research: Heteroglossia**

Meanings and their significance emerge in the dialogical instance, whereby meaning does not depend of one or the other participant in the dialogue but in what is created *in-between*. It is a shared territory. It is here in this space formed by the two and more participants where dialogue can be pursued at deeper levels (Clark & Holquist, 1984). This means not only that meaning needs to be shared but also the degree in which multiplicity and struggle that characterise this process of negotiation can emerge. Equally, the stratification, diversity and randomness of what Bakhtin (1981; 1986) denominates as *heteroglossia*<sup>3</sup> can be perceived not only as a static invariant in the life of discourses, but also what ensures its dynamism. *Heteroglossia*, introduced by Bakhtin, makes reference to simultaneous differences that exist in dialogue. It is a situation, the situation of a subject surrounded by the myriad responses he/she might make at any particular point, but any one of each must be framed in a specific discourse selected from the teeming alternatives available. It is a way of conceiving the world as made up of roiling mass of languages, each of which has its own distinct formal markers. These features are never purely formal, for each has associated with it a set of distinctive values and presuppositions (Holquist, 1997). Thus, *heteroglossia* governs the operation of meanings.

Embracing heteroglotic dynamism of narrating, we advance and explore the story of *Fabricas Recuperadas*, recovered enterprises, using as a point of departure ideas by the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981; 1986; 1999) and Boje's adoption of Bakhtin (2005; 2008) to engage with organisation discourse and sense making. We have mentioned that the dynamic forces that constitute organisations are a reflection of *heteroglossia*. These forces are produced by socio-ideological and historical forces (Dentith, 1996) and the cultural context. This, in turn, refers to the organisational discourses and activities retained by collective memory with political and moral-end objectives (Bakhtin, 1986). For instance, at any given moment of its historical existence organisational discourses represent the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between different tendencies, all of which intersect each other in a variety of ways forming new typifying discourses (Bakhtin, 1981:291).

Together, the forces of *heteroglossia* and organisational ideology provide the conditions in which dialogue and storyisation are fought and constituted within organisations. In this dense and conflicting network of discourses denominated 'organisation' it is essentially possible to distinguish two organisational forces actively at work: centripetal and centrifugal forces (Clark & Holquist, 1984; Gardiner, 1992; Dentith, 1996; Burkitt, 1998). On the one hand, centripetal forces (established ideology/official language) reflect the socio-political project of centralisation or hegemony (Dentith, 1996). For example, when Donaldson and Lorsch (1983) point out that ideology help to simplify and schematise the system of managerial practice, the system of norms and regulation that defines managers' competence, managers' corporate risk, and managers' decisions (p 99), they are reflecting on the 'official' or 'established' social structural arrangements of the organisation. These are, in effect, the powerful bureaucratic hierarchical forces that are established not only in organisations but also in the market, which suggests that the correct way to proceed is by explicitly codifying the language and practice of individuals. These are the forces of centralisation and unification; of control and power in organisations. On the other hand, centrifugal forces (behavioural/unofficial ideology) perform their uninterrupted opposite work of decentralisation and dis-unification (Clark & Holquist, 1984; Dentith, 1996) in organisations. These are the everyday language and practices that reflect people's own form of representing

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<sup>3</sup> Heteroglossia is defined by Bakhtin as simultaneous differences (i.e., several/diverse voices) that are found in dialogue, each associated with a set of distinctive values and presuppositions that governs the operation of meaning (Holquist, 1997).

culture; local way of expressing, in which discourses are free from the established repression (Burkitt, 1998:172). Centrifugal forces manifest *heteroglossia*; and, reveals the gaps that exist within the official codes, the norms, the hierarchies of an organisation, helping us as researchers to reveal that the relation of representation can be reconstituted as relation of participation, or at the very least that the specular basis of representation can be transformed into one which implies an involvement which representation, its objects and its recipients.

### **Research Design: Contextualising the storytelling of Buenos Aires' *Fábricas Recuperadas***

This paper posits the study of *Fábricas Recuperadas* as a dialogical *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin, 1986) that reflect the living story process of organising (Boje, 2003; 2005; 2008). We acknowledge that semantic space that exists in the activity of authoring organisation, it is neither in the inner nor elsewhere deconstructionist but somewhere 'in-between' and this is where we found the representations of *Fábricas Recuperadas* for narrating to unfold.

Boje described living story as a space of *in-between* between narratives and ante-narratives which encompass many modes of expression as well as different trajectories or directions for a story to unfold. Living stories are part of a collective tale that coalesces to give systematicity to the fragmentation, invisibility and interweaving that reflect an unfolding construction of reality of individuals (Boje, 2003). The disruption of the coherent storyline lived in Argentina during the crisis and the emergence of different ante-stories to explain what was taking place *ex ante* make this method the most appropriate to explore the issue associated with the organizational processes in local recovered enterprises. *Heteroglossia* results in the plurality in the constant transformation of organisational dialogues. The paper builds on living stories of *Fábricas Recuperadas* collected from ethnographic work and interviews conducted in Argentina during the time of the crisis and more specifically over the years 2004 to 2006.

Boje (2005) emphasises that in the fabric of stories at least four dimensions can be appreciated. First dimension is associated with the simultaneity of stories, taking place in different geographical locations, spaces and temporalities. Second dimension of the story's fabric, raised by Boje, is the fragmentation of tales. People do not tell full blown and well rehearsed tales. They always live room for imaginations and gaps in their stories. We only hear part of something and not the full account. Only in journalism and when we narrate our research we try to contrive this impression. Trajectory is the third dimension in the story's fabric, raised by Boje. Trajectory refers to the emergence of coherence in narrative, not as a single tale but as part of a collective ante-narrative, 'it picks up and shed meaning along different places and across different temporalities' (Boje, 2005). Finally, morphing of living story elements makes the fourth dimension (choice of incidents, characterizations, implications). This takes place as a part of the re-historization process in order to highlight alternative values, persons or episodes. This what makes the process of living story transformative to a context or indeed what transform the con[text] itself.

In the next section of the paper we look at examples of the multilayered fabric of the story that started to emerged in Argentina during the crisis. It is the interweaving of what, following Bakhtin (1981; 1986) can be represented as the interplay in-between centripetal and centrifugal forces, shaping and re-shaping the story fabric of these organisations and disputing the given sense-making of how things should be done, told or run.

### **Living Fabrics of Buenos Aires' *Fábricas Recuperadas***

*Occupy, resist, produce*

The morphing of *Fábricas Recuperadas* is associated with the simultaneous experiences lived in Argentina during the economic crisis that started to unfold in the local urban communities from 2001. Argentina, like most economies in the region due to its foreign debt was pushed to adopt drastic economic reforms that indebted the country further (Imas, 2010). During the crisis citizens were not allowed to access their money in banks and large numbers of businesses were declared bankrupt. This prompted the emergence of different narratives to account for living stories of what individuals, communities and businesses were experiencing and trying to make sense of these experiences. New fragmented trajectories of individual tales made possible the co-authoring of simultaneous narratives that sprang all over Argentina.

In the midst of the socio-economic crisis that reached the pick in 2001 and continued to unfold, thousands of Argentinean workers have started to turn around the problem of unemployment by taking over the processes and the means of production into their own hands. The process is referred to as ‘recovering’ as it implies keeping the businesses open and keeping workers alive by provision of paid jobs, emphasising their commitment. These recovered factories represent different approaches to running organizations with the flat structure and ‘the workers control’ at the centre. As far as the legal and administrative processes go, the most common arrangement was a help offered from local authorities for the so-called a phased transfer. The use of the buildings to carry out the work was for agreed for temporary period in a form of so called ‘comodato’, based on a contract in which the council agreed to cede the factory premises free of charge, as a form of a loan. Over first few years, it was local government who paid the rent on the premises meeting outstanding debts to the owner. After the initial period, co-operative run by workers was given an option to buy out the business. Yet the harsh realities of the take over with the unpaid bills implied that factories had no electricity, running water, or the raw materials to produce spare parts. Such disruption to the working life had a major impact on employees’ security and paid employment. As a living story on the one hand, the legitimate discourse that becomes a part of a coherent narrative seems to imposes perdition and despair among individuals who were not only losing their incomes but had no access to their money. It immediately rebuked to start a different story fabric as the one they knew was ‘dead’ or bankrupt.

*“When in 2002 the bankruptcy of the firm was in evidence and the owners tried to remove the machinery and equipment, prompted all workers to take some action and occupied the factory” (Marki employee).*

At the outset of the crisis in 2001, 1,800 organisations were declared bankrupt and were abandoned by their owners. Of those, only 180 began a different tale of reclaiming and morphing into complete different forms to what the organisation was. *Fábricas Recuperadas* had a connection to the Western idea of legitimacy that is given by ownership. Yet, uncertainty was supplanted by the industrialist assumption of working for the management or patron. Workers started to find a common trajectory for storying of continuation, something they felt was lost. Equally, their interpretation of the official events reframed the understanding of what a ‘bankrupt’ business meant before the law. A co-emerging of a new story of legitimacy was told by framing a right to work there and protect income. At the same time, the workers violated the legal rights of the owners to close down.

*“In 2002, we occupied the factory as prevention from the owners and management to remove the assets and the tools of the factory. This was in the middle of the bankruptcy process. The management put an order of eviction for months. With the help of our neighbours we managed to resist for months the police who demanded us to leave as we were occupying a private property” (Marki employee)*

Eight members of the factory occupied the place in order to preserve their rights. It was a challenging time, including confrontations with the police force that came to evict their occupation and their rights.

*“The night they came to evict us, we were printing a book that was going to go out in the next days. We did a mini assembly and decided to continue with our work. A neighbour helped us to trick the police by taking all the printing books through a hole in the wall and then through his house, which was next to the factory. In this way we managed to survive the police harassment and uncertainty of losing our jobs and only income” (Marki employee)*

In such a struggle, workers in *Fabricas Recuperadas* found themselves *in-between* the stories; in between those stories that were dying and the stories that were being lived with the altered forms of meanings that contested and rearranged the social fabric that has governed and validated dominant discourse in their understanding and working condition of the international-scale crisis. Equally, *in-betweenness* facilitates a change of the trajectory of the way the factory was conceived before the crisis, and converting it into something different for employees themselves and the community. It is here where the new stories have been re-authored by simultaneous differences of representing a life condition under a threat.

*“The Argentine crisis generated a rupture in-between what is considered legitimate and legal within a democratic society. It made possible the violation of private property such as in the case of occupying a factory with the support of our people. The capitalist model claims that legitimacy and legality are both the same. The crisis demonstrated that this was not the case. People questioned the system, government, police and media. An occupation was perceived to be legitimate; to imagine that they were to close down so many businesses, knowing that there was already a high level of unemployment was shocking for us (Marki employee)”*

This way of narrating is indeed not scripted. Depending on the ways one can conceptualise the living stories that unfold during this process of ante-storying, we can posit narrating processes as consequence of a Bakhtinian sense-making, whereby not retrospectively but in the moment, in situ, multiple realities are contested and reproduced, in other words, in an interwoven of meanings of the now. Paradoxically, understandings of what the concept of closure meant is associated with *‘something that is working, selling and functioning; where all the employees are working and it is about to close’*. Multiple readings of employees’ narrative alter the ways of representing initially by the owners of the firm. Working is carried out on the premises, despite orders of vacate the site. During this process a reorganisation is taken place; a transformation into a different model of managing and organising based on participative decision-making. The factory indeed opens its doors to the community where it is located and when it was eventually declared by the law as theirs: *“We decided that the factory should have a ‘social’ meaning. Therefore, we founded a cultural centre with activities of all kind in which volunteers and local neighbours participate” (Marki employee)*

Everyone in the *Fabrica* becomes a participant; creating a polysemous reading of the activities and practices. Everyone was made a partner, with a voice. *“When we have a problem we helped each other. For example, once one of our mates broke his leg and could not work for months. We all supported him, maintaining his salary and position” (Marki employee)*

The factory downsized over the years to thirteen employees. The process of professionalization also took place once the enterprise lost the managerial class. *“Now, we have jobs but salaries are low and we are trying to ‘dignify’ work; we can have a union recognition. Work consciousness as a social good emerges from the crisis” (Marki, employee).*

The most difficult part of dealing with the subjectivities of managing was a notion of a discipline. As the employees expressed they did not have a manager or anyone to decide on their own with regard to their working schedule and conditions they wanted to implement.

*“What came out of it is the total level of participation. People do not accepted that a director or union directive makes decisions on their behalf. It is a right that individuals have to consult each other; it is an acquired value” (Marki employee)*

In the factory premises, old equipment (the 1950s and 1970s) embodies the new narratives of work. Participation, common simultaneous narratives emerge, intersecting representation of work. The ownership is claimed based on shared values, traditions, beliefs.

*“Working together, sharing and enjoying our presence is central to the way we are now organised. Our problems are associated to growth. As we produce enough to keep going, we are still unable to offer jobs to unemployed workers. This affects our morale” (Marki employee).*

The coherent narrative of globalised capitalist success dependent upon efficient management was shattered in the tale of *Fabricas Recuperadas*. The illegal and illegitimate occupation defined within capitalist discursive sense has collapsed. It is what Boje described as a dead narrative. The workers, and their communities interrupted and deconstructed this meta-narrative in order to co-create their own one. *“Public rationality is understood as intelligence, power and efficiency. In contrast, the rationality of domestic life is sustained by women and family. My wife came to support us here. Not only that, the whole families came here to support us when we needed them” (Marki employee).*

More fragmented and lose narratives unfold around the themes of livelihood and continuity. Maintaining a sense of trajectory, not of unifying one voice but of separate voices in the understanding of the now. It was the involved and committed narrativisation of multitude of existence that constructed a context. Polyphony can be appreciated in these dialogical discursive readings and authoring of the *Fabricas* tales.

*“It is direct democracy. People talk about a participative democracy. They do so often. But it is a different thing to participate than to decide. It is very important that we develop a different kind of society whereby instances of direct democracy throughout what we experience with leaders, standards, ideological positions, ideas of different kind and so on do not become in the traditional sense framed” (Marki employee)*

Historically, it is the re-historisation of a particular group in the crisis context that has suffered and is under struggle: *“We are historical subjects. We stop being inactive which is what voting and elections offered us; what the system offered us. We stop being marginal, unemployed, excluded, to become historical subjects, participant subjects. Authors of our own lives” (Javier)*

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The story of *Fabricas Recuperadas* illustrates a strategy for narrating of interpretive research that emerges out a heteroglossic perspective, pointing out how dominant discourse as a framing force for a story to unfold, can be altered. *“I believe that, being able to communicate and share your ideas is central not for constructing a hegemonic or unified movement, but rather for constructing diversity, and this is what matters most” (Cristina)*

We have argued that in researching organizational lives, what we can only describe is the complex infinitely rich chain of organisational participative discursive acts that take place, and through the subsequent dialogical transformation that takes place in our discursive

act of understanding it through the research process. This, in turn, allows us to account for the *heteroglotic* character of organising narrative, for the polyphony of voices, the multiplicity of discourses that populate the chain of dialogical – organisational – relations by different agents [authors] as illustrated in the tale of *Fabricas Recuperadas*. It is precisely this *heteroglotic* dynamism that governs organisational existence and that in our view challenges the still prevalent dominant management ideology which seeks to author organisations as a unified, completed and finalised process. What is assumed as the hegemony of strict accountability between hierarchical levels of control in the organisation design, representing organisations as centralised and unified processes is here challenged in the processes of meaning making, in continuous negotiation for meanings between the various organisational voices (organisational members and their representations) in the transformation of organisational interpretations.

We have proposed narrating as an open dialogical space upon which sense-making emerges, based on a collaborative process with multiple openings and meanings. Dialogical space of narrating of *Fabricas Recuperadas* has been constructed through interweaving of voices. Narrating became here an ensemble of ideas, discourses and narrated actions, a process of co-creation. In a sense, living storyisation of *Fabricas Recuperadas* is based on a complex co-construction that grows without clear scripts, rules or models but comes out of the people themselves. This is what transpires from this research. We argued that primarily in situation such as the one lived in Argentina, people construct a flow of living stories that are created in-between, in that contested space between two or more authors. In this complex and dynamic transaction of meaning ante-narratives and narratives come together to morph into new forms of narrativization that give life to newer stories. Such process breaks with hegemonic sense-making and allow for dialogical instances to shape and re-shape the constitution of local meaning in a new form of organisation narrative. We conclude that dialogism in the research process, perceived as the interplay of emotive-ethic forces, can result in an approach to narrating that embraces commitment, and we argue, facilitate openness in research, a space for accepting, being heard, evoking, and being listened to.

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