

SPECIAL FEATURE

“Every time, they took more from us”: Privatization and Telecommunications Workers in Rural Argentina, 1969–2000

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Abstract

This article analyzes the lasting effects of privatization on public-sector telecommunications workers in Argentina’s rural interior. I draw on over fifty hours of oral histories carried out from 2015 to 2017 with former ENTel and Telefónica workers in General Pico, in the interior province of La Pampa, Argentina. This unique source base reveals how the material objects themselves acquired symbolic weight in the minds of workers, and how the introduction of new technologies and labor regimes after privatization in 1990 eroded workers’ feelings of loyalty toward and ownership over the previously state-run company. This article specifically explores notions of trauma as related to the destruction of the physical materials of work, and the association between that destruction and the mass layoffs that followed. David Harvey’s engagement with creative destruction in late capitalism has suggested that “continuous innovation”—whether technological or practical—has meant the devaluation and/or destruction of existing labor relations. I expand this concept to show how this logic of “creative destruction” maps onto spatialized ideas of modernity. The trauma that workers experienced in the 1990s is most productively understood vis-à-vis the unfulfilled promises of “progress” which claimed to bring efficiency, growth, and long-term stability but instead delivered job loss, atomization, and the breakdown of social relations of labor.

Keywords: Argentina; telecommunications; labor relations; privatization; Global South; technology

Introduction

Machinery sailed through the air in a long arc before crashing into the growing pile on the street below. Switchboards, monitors, and handsets formed a heap outside the offices of Telefónica, formerly the Empresa Nacional de Telecomunicaciones (National Telecommunications Company, ENTel), in General Pico (also called Pico), a small city in La Pampa province. A handful of current and former workers, some who had spent decades with ENTel, watched as Telefónica employees hurled the equipment—equipment that they had trained on and used to connect people across Argentina’s rural interior—from the windows of the company’s Pico headquarters.¹ Ten years prior, in November 1990, recently elected president Carlos

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Menem had finalized the sale of ENTel to a pair of foreign corporations, with the French *Télécom* assuming control of networks in Argentina's northern provinces and the Spanish *Telefónica* taking over the country's southern half. For the workers themselves, the discarded technology, hauled off in trucks later that day, provided a stark physical reminder of privatization's consequences for labor relations and how those transformations affected the people who had built their careers—and lives—around ENTel.

In his 2007 article “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,” geographer David Harvey argued that, despite its rhetorical promotion of freedom and opportunity, the neoliberal discourse that became hegemonic after the 1970s has instead justified a global project to restore class relations undermined by the post-World War II growth of the social welfare state.² Building from the concept of “creative destruction”—the idea that capitalism destroys in order to construct the new from the rubble—Harvey claimed as a defining characteristic of neoliberalism that any “creation” was redistributive rather than generative.³ He also points to Argentina in the 1990s as exemplifying a broader pattern, though his analysis necessarily remains at the macro level. This essay draws on oral histories with Pico's *ex-telefonicos* (telecommunications workers) to evaluate Harvey's claims about creative destruction in the era of privatization. Examining a specific case, ENTel Pico, foregrounds workers' lived experiences within this larger conversation. I argue that Harvey's conceptualization of neoliberalism helps explain the breakdown of the social relations of labor at ENTel/*Telefónica* General Pico in the aftermath of the company's sale. In turn, memories of *Telefónica*'s disposal of old machinery illuminate neoliberal capitalism's logic of creative destruction and its effects on workers.

This article proceeds in two sections. Part I analyzes ENTel Pico's operations from the mid-1960s through 1990, drawing on both archival material and testimonies from former employees. This reconstruction underscores two main points. First, ENTel's uneven access to capital produced a technologically varied—and generally inefficient—telecommunications system. This variety required a constantly evolving skill-set, which workers developed through company-provided training programs. And second, that the legal relationship between ENTel and the telecommunications workers' union, FOETRA, defined by their collective bargaining agreement, remained largely constant from 1975 to 1990.⁴ Part II begins with Menem's 1990 sale of ENTel and moves to an examination of the memories of Pico's *ex-telefonicos* around the changing social relations of labor.⁵ For many former employees, *Telefónica*'s take-over provoked the erosion of working conditions, benefits, and relationships, and reflecting on oral history practice suggests how this culminated in the traumatic collapse of their existing world order. In a brief conclusion, I return to Harvey's claims and extend his theory to consider what I term “capitalist Luddism” within the broader discussion of creative destruction.

Part I: A National Company

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Argentina led Latin America in telecommunications development and infrastructure. Like the railroads of the 1800s, foreign capital originally dominated as the French, the British, and—by the 1930s—the

United States invested heavily in Argentine networks.⁶ After Juan Perón's election in 1946, the new government pushed an incremental nationalization program that culminated in the establishment of *Teléfonos del Estado* in 1949. Seven years later, this company became the *Empresa Nacional de Telecomunicaciones*, the name it bore for more than three decades. From the 1940s through the 1980s, various administrations considered at least partial privatization, but few seriously attempted large-scale overhauls.⁷ Rather, during the mid-twentieth century, there existed a broad if unsteady consensus that certain economic sectors were of national interest and therefore these public enterprises should not be sold off, including the state telecommunications company. This general agreement, however, did not prevent pervasive instability throughout the cycle of civilian and military administrations over that same period.⁸ For ENTel, this meant irregular access to investment capital, which translated to varied and inconsistent expansion that often reflected an absence of coherent central planning.

As the telecommunications industry grew, Argentina's *telefónicos* pursued better conditions and better pay. Fighting back against the foreign-owned companies of the early 1900s, workers eventually formed the *Federación de Obreros y Empleados Telefónicos* (FOET), the precursor to FOETRA. FOET played a key role in the labor movement's growth during the 1930s and 1940s, aiding Juan Perón's rise to power.⁹ On April 20, 1950, this organization formally became the *Federación de Obreros y Empleados de la Republica Argentina*. Despite the 1955 coup and Peronism's proscription, FOETRA's political power continued to grow. The union backed the Peronist *Resistencia* through the early 1960s, even as employees confronted growing factionization with the foundation of new unions for administrative personnel and supervisors in 1958 and 1962, respectively.¹⁰ The 1960s witnessed a rise in worker militancy, and in 1968, Julio Guillán, the secretary general of FOETRA Buenos Aires, assumed a key role in the CGT de los Argentinos (CGTA), the combative left wing of the labor movement led by Raimondo Ongaro and Agustín Tosco.¹¹ Although the CGTA petered out, the 1975 *convenio colectivo* (collective bargaining agreement) negotiated by FOETRA demonstrated the union's strength, providing telephone workers numerous concrete material benefits related to pay, vacation, overtime, and healthcare.¹² Because these policies were decided through centralized negotiations led by the national-level union, they reverberated down to the local chapters even when those chapters remained disconnected from the negotiations themselves.¹³

Like most Argentine trade unions, there existed considerable ideological and geographic differences among ENTel's chapters. For example, disconnects between national leadership and shop-level committees could produce contrasting views on "the union" as an institution, with some rank-and-file members criticizing the union bureaucracy.¹⁴ FOETRA Buenos Aires, led by Guillán, adopted an increasingly militant role on the national scene, but few *telefónicos* from Pico recalled holding strong political beliefs during the 1960s/1970s. Responding to questions about conflicts at ENTel from this period, their answers reinforced the distance between Argentina's urban centers and rural interior. Where telecommunications workers in major cities frequently confronted management over salaries and working conditions, ENTel employees in La Pampa described more harmonious relationships.

Comments like “[we] always depended on Buenos Aires” or “those things happened in Buenos Aires, but they didn’t really happen [here]” underscored the physical and political separation.¹⁵ Instead, their accounts tended to emphasize respect and loyalty both between workers and the company and among the workers themselves. While everyone belonged to FOETRA—and while they occasionally participated in national-level actions—ENTel Pico’s personnel felt a common bond across job classes. Alberto Lamella, a former operator, discussed the workplace’s internal dynamics, stating that even when the company was intervened after 1976, “there was always very good treatment [between administrators and employees]...[we] went out to eat, had cookouts, hung out together.”¹⁶ Almost everyone confirmed this general collegiality.

While Pico’s ex-telefónicos tended to remember this period vis-à-vis their relationship to the company, most did not explicitly connect the national union to, for example, the benefits they received. However, those benefits nevertheless played a key role in fostering the wider culture of respect and loyalty, as exemplified by ENTel’s capacitation programs. The mid-twentieth century’s revolving door of civil and military governments ensured that state enterprises faced constant uncertainty, which for ENTel meant that diverse technologies and equipment often had to be made compatible in daily practice. Former workers recalled the company’s continuing education programs (formalized in the 1975 collective bargaining agreement), which taught everything from electrical and electromechanical skills to computation and technical service, as central to what made the job worthwhile.¹⁷ Employees attended trainings across the country, though mostly in Buenos Aires. Some remembered going two or three times a year, and explicitly stated that these courses continued even under the most recent military dictatorship (1976–1983), despite the regime’s common association with the rise of neoliberalism in Argentina.¹⁸ As one ex-employee explained, “ENTel was of the state, the state had a relationship to the worker. I think there was an affinity for training people.”¹⁹ Multiple factors undoubtedly contributed to the recurrence of respect and loyalty in these narratives, but the company’s investment in education played a key role. Subjects specifically mentioned the possibility for advancement, the acquisition of new knowledge, and even the appreciation for colleagues’ abilities as reasons they felt connected to their jobs and their coworkers—including management.²⁰ Because of the hodgepodge of technologies that ENTel relied on, these company-provided trainings both foregrounded employees’ value and enabled them to increase that value.

Significantly, former telephone workers also spoke frankly about ENTel’s failings.²¹ Demand for new lines always outpaced supply, sometimes by orders of magnitude that could lead to multiyear waits for customers wanting a home phone. Repairs often took weeks to complete, depending on numerous factors ranging from the availability of materials to the attitude of personnel. For Pico specifically, connections to the rest of Argentina suffered from long wait times and inconsistent service.²² Yet many also framed the story as one of incremental improvements, even under difficult circumstances. Despite the brutality of the most recent dictatorship, workers tended to describe that period in positive terms both professionally and personally. Many acknowledged the regime’s violence, but explained that their work remained steady, and that they married, had children, and built homes. As one interviewee stated, “For me, it wasn’t that bad.”²³ The dictatorship’s minister of economy

pushed an aggressive laissez-faire agenda, but these policies produced inconsistent results for ENTel, especially for more remote branches like ENTel Pico.²⁴ In Buenos Aires and other major urban areas, the company's military administrators intervened the union, extended hours, and repressed dissent—sometimes violently—but nationally the total number of employees remained steady, and the state continued to invest in infrastructure, albeit somewhat haphazardly.²⁵ Moreover, because the 1975 collective bargaining agreement technically remained in effect (despite the 1976 prohibition on collective bargaining, existing *convenios* were left in place), at a formal level workers retained the benefits authorized by those agreements.

The 1983 election of Raúl Alfonsín brought the return of democracy and a shift away from efforts to shrink the state sector, generally, and ENTel, specifically—at least in the initial public discourse. In 1985, an ambitious plan to install one million additional lines over the next five years, known as Plan Megatel, launched with the goal of resolving the company's persistent problems around financing and service. The project, however, never came to fruition as only a fraction of the promised lines and upgrades materialized, paving the way for the government's attempted privatization in 1987—an attempt that was scuttled in part by opposition from FOETRA.²⁶ Several former Pico workers recalled Plan Megatel with some clarity, and one claimed the initiative had been part of a larger shift in La Pampa as the province “really began to work” in the 1980s.²⁷ Another contrasted the mid-1980s to the dictatorship period, noting that only after 1985 was expansion and the incorporation of new technologies successfully implemented.²⁸ Yet given Plan Megatel's overall failure, we must read these interpretations cautiously.²⁹ As the following section will explore in more detail, the trauma of privatization continues to condition memories of the ENTel era, such that accounts of Plan Megatel's success might well reflect an idealized recollection meant to, in part, contrast with privatization under Menem.

Part II: The Trauma of Broken Things

The disappointment of Plan Megatel effectively sealed ENTel's fate. By the late 1980s, Argentina found itself facing economic catastrophe as hyperinflation racked the country, producing record instability and undermining everything from financial systems to food access.³⁰ Under pressure from all directions, Alfonsín stepped down prior to the end of his mandate, allowing incoming president Carlos Menem to assume control several months early. Though a Peronist, Menem's approach contradicted decades of accepted Peronist orthodoxy. During his nearly ten years in office, he would oversee the dramatic reorientation of Argentina's economy as public enterprises were sold off to private investors, the state sector was drastically reduced, and financial speculation flourished. Recent scholarship has shown that this overhaul went beyond the economic sector, remaking Argentine social and cultural relations, as well.³¹ Critical to the transformation of industrial relations after 1989/1990 was the passage of Law 24,013 (the so-called “Ley de Empleo”), which alongside several executive decrees paved the way for the flexibilization of labor through new contract regimens and restrictions on workers' actions.³² This, in turn, would reverberate across workers' social lives, contributing to a partial but significant disaggregation of the social bonds that had linked Argentines throughout the previous decades.

The sale of ENTEL reflected the broader logic of Menem's presidency, as it aimed to both generate immediate revenue to help control the country's inflationary spiral and rid the state of a long-term investment (specifically by dismissing ENTEL personnel).³³ Since 1990, it has become a paradigmatic example of the Menemist program, generating a considerable bibliography that explores the reformation of the telecommunications sector.³⁴ Various governments had considered shrinking the state's role in telecommunications over the previous four decades, with the most recent military dictatorship expanding tertiarized workers and the Alfonsín administration proposing privatization. But these plans never fully materialized, at least partially owing to resistance from workers and state officials. Within months of taking power, however, Menem permanently changed the landscape, setting the stage for previously unimaginable levels of precarity. Returning to David Harvey, the transition from ENTEL to Telefónica marked a significant redistribution of power away from labor and in favor of capital, typified by those laws that facilitated the firing of public-sector employees and the sale of state enterprises.³⁵ Combining Harvey's analysis of neoliberalism with workers' testimonies illuminates the remaking of the social relations of labor at ENTEL/Telefónica in General Pico.

For telefónicos in large cities, especially Buenos Aires, their resistance to the 1990 sale remains a critical moral and political touchstone, a point that reinforces their agency. FOETRA Buenos Aires, for example, has established and sustained a narrative that centers the union's militancy in defense of historical conquests won during the ENTEL years.³⁶ Conversely, in Pico, not only were accounts of local opposition absent but subjects did not mention any national efforts to fight back in 1990. Privatization loomed over their professional and personal life stories, but largely as something inevitable. In response to questions about other periods of their careers, like the 1976–1983 dictatorship, interviewees consistently returned to the 1990 sale and its fallout as the rupture that transformed relationships among workers, between workers and the company, and between the company and customers.³⁷ The trauma of privatization thus conditioned the broader (re)construction of their personal narratives.

As Harvey notes, a central claim of neoliberal discourse is the free market's ability to correct the "failures" and "inefficiencies" of state-directed enterprises by increasing their competitiveness.³⁸ Per this logic, privatization encourages competition—and, consequently, progress and growth. ENTEL had a longstanding reputation for inefficiency, which critics delighted in pointing out, and which former employees corroborated.³⁹ However, no interviewee suggested that privatization had resolved these issues.⁴⁰ On the contrary, most insisted that Telefónica brought worse service and working conditions. Vicente Galdós, who started with ENTEL as a night operator in 1970 and eventually rose to supervisor before retiring from Telefónica in 2013, spoke to this tension:

And I'll tell you what else, when it was ENTEL, which was a national company, maybe the service wasn't technologically up to date, but it was more. The workers were loyal, they would get offended if you spoke badly of ENTEL. And I felt it, as if you were talking about me, because I lived it. Here there was a faulty telephone, the next day it would be repaired. Today, thirty days go by...forty days or more without a telephone, because they got rid of all the linemen from outside,

so they have to send them from [General Pico]. So the service today, with all the technology, is worse. Before they would attend to you and they'd fix everything, today nothing. Today, they give the employees a daily goal, they have to fix five phones, so they go and they repair five phones, half an hour for each, and you think they're gonna keep working? No, they did their five. "I'm not working more than that," that's the goal they have. There's no more commitment on the part of the workers to the company, the company is the enemy of the workers.⁴¹

Galdós's description typified a broader pattern by stressing privatization's negative effects across multiple overlapping fronts. First, though his former coworkers repeatedly mentioned ENTel's inefficiencies, Galdós highlighted something else entirely: he argued that people's pride in working for a "national company" translated to greater effort and productivity. Relatedly, his critique reaffirmed the disconnect between the supposed improvements brought by Telefónica and the apparent consequences for clients. The various issues that racked ENTel were not simply less important than the breakdown of relationships between workers, company, and customers, they no longer featured at all. Instead, long wait times and shoddy repairs were caused by neoliberal attempts to "modernize" the infrastructure. Finally, Galdós explicitly criticized the introduction of a piece-rate system, itself a long-standing objective of capital during the twentieth century.⁴² Rather than grounding this claim in the transformation of labor practices, however, Galdós underscored the antagonistic relationship between client and company. His memory, echoed by other ex-telefónicos, supported the larger claim that privatization had not produced a better system—it had destroyed what the workers had built.

This declaration, alongside the testimonies analyzed previously, raises critical questions about memory and oral historical practice. That workers' accounts of privatization and its effects might be "inaccurate" matters far less than what meanings we can draw from them. For example, looking at telecommunications workers in bigger cities, like Buenos Aires, we note a discrepancy between today's dominant narrative emphasizing resistance and research indicating that telefónicos in the late 1980s tended to favor privatization. In interviews with ENTel employees before the 1990 sale, Peter Ranis identified a general belief in the efficiency of private (and especially foreign) enterprises as compared to state-run companies, even as some subjects voiced trepidation about the possibility of layoffs.⁴³ That this logic—which closely parallels the rhetoric Menem used to justify privatization—would be politically untenable in the present illustrates how the "errors and inventions" of current memory paradigms reveal implications that might otherwise go unnoticed.⁴⁴

Unlike their Buenos Aires colleagues, testimonies from former ENTel Pico workers were framed primarily by nostalgia for a past foreclosed by privatization rather than as a story about opposition. Everyone I interviewed spoke about the future with something akin to hopelessness. No one envisioned a world in which things might "get better," and certainly not one where the labor conditions at Telefónica might return to what had existed under ENTel. Questions about past professional experiences often produced answers that lamented the present-day rise of crime, general lack of respect, and breakdown of social norms. In this sense, the ex-telefónicos' recollections were

infused by an emotional and almost reactionary longing for what once existed, rather than what some scholars have characterized as “progressive nostalgia,” or “nostalgia for the future.”⁴⁵ There were, perhaps, elements of this “progressive nostalgia” present in these testimonies: a “sense of loss, tempered with overt pride” and “a desire to assert a sense of communal belonging and sense of place in the context of rapid deindustrialization and social change.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the affective register of the interviews did not suggest a potential “solution” for the future, but rather mourned a vanished past.

This nostalgia’s roots lay, at least partially, in positive recollections of ENTel’s treatment of workers (e.g., benefits, training programs, sense of belonging), but this attitude cannot be divorced from the trauma of privatization itself. Subjects recalled that when Telefónica arrived in Pico, “they wanted to erase everything, to throw people out in the street,” and that the new administrators “just kicked out” those employees that were no longer needed.⁴⁷ Descriptions of the perceived mistreatment of human beings closely paralleled the sense of loss in memories of the destruction of old equipment. In both cases, the transition from “national company” to private enterprise destroyed the existing infrastructure, whether technological or interpersonal, and left most of Pico’s telefónicos at the precarious margins. For decades, their value had depended on their ability to manipulate the complex and not entirely compatible array of switchboards, computers, transmitters, and Telex machines. After 1990, the arrival of new materials, new practices, and new technologies steadily eroded that value—and unlike ENTel, testimonies portrayed Telefónica as unconcerned with providing opportunities for employees to keep up with those changes. New *convenios colectivos*, imposed in 1990 and increasingly decentralized (i.e., no longer negotiated or functioning on a national scale), eliminated many of the existing benefits and protections that workers had enjoyed over the previous decades.⁴⁸ Small wonder, then, that ex-employees who saw their knowledge and experience discounted and discarded interpreted the transition as an assault on their very selves.

Across the interviews, subjects frequently became emotional remembering their time at ENTel/Telefónica. Nearly everyone felt that Telefónica had treated them and/or others poorly, and they lamented what they had lost during the 1990s. Responding to a question about company-provided healthcare, one former employee explained that while ENTel’s plan had remained strong through the 1970s and 1980s, it effectively disappeared after 1990.⁴⁹ Along similar lines, Ana Ortíz, an operator who spent more than three decades with ENTel and Telefónica, recalled that her benefits (sick days, vacation days, and bonuses) just vanished after privatization, explaining with a rueful chuckle that “Every time, they took more from us.”⁵⁰ Although all those I spoke with still lived in the small town of General Pico, their references to old coworkers and past experiences made clear that they did not see one another very often. I identified subjects via the “snowball method,” which brought former colleagues together, often for the first time in several years. Many of these interactions included emotional conversations about the past and ended with participants crying openly. That these people, who had worked alongside each other for years, now essentially never interacted (even in a small town of some sixty thousand people) reinforced the atomization of social relations in the aftermath of privatization. It became evident that the “more” to which Ortíz referred went beyond sick days and

bonuses—it also meant connections with colleagues, pride in the job, and a sense of identity.⁵¹ Harvey describes the neoliberal transfer of public assets to the private sector as a policy of dispossession aimed at rolling back workers' gains made during the postwar era.⁵² For Pico's telefónicos, privatization dispossessed them of not just job security, wages, and benefits, but ultimately the status and relationships that had defined their lives.

Conclusions

In his seminal *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson argued for understanding Luddism as a conscious and self-interested defense of existing livelihoods rather than reactionary technophobia impeding the march of progress.⁵³ Early nineteenth-century Luddites destroyed machinery because they saw it as a threat to established relations of production, and therefore to their own socioeconomic, political, and cultural standing. They justified their attacks on early factories and industrial looms as necessary for protecting the value of workers' labor.⁵⁴ Nearly two hundred years later, Telefónica's destruction of telecommunications technology followed a similar, albeit inverted logic. The company discarded old equipment to devalue labor by rendering irrelevant employees' knowledge and experience, representing a moment of what I term "capitalist Luddism"—destroying technology not to preserve labor's value but instead to undermine it. A primary, and intentional, consequence of the elimination of switchboards, handsets, computers, etc. was the breakdown of the social relations of labor. The resonance between accounts of Telefónica administrators hurling equipment from windows and subjects' memories of former employees being tossed into the street illustrated the blurred boundaries between material and human resources under neoliberalism. Along both axes, management sought increased efficiency by casting off machines and people that no longer had value. Indeed, the two were inextricably linked, as labor's utility diminished in line with the disposal of the old technology. The erosion of the respect, camaraderie, and loyalty that ex-telefónicos recalled as defining ENTel helps explain why the memory of equipment being tossed into the street could provoke tears. Where the Luddites destroyed technology to protect the value of their labor, capital destroys anything—physical machines, productive regimens, human relations—to protect and expand profits.

The stark contrast in dominant narratives of "resistance" (or lack thereof) between Buenos Aires and General Pico also highlights the importance of moving outside urban centers to consider how capitalism's creative destruction functions in other spaces. At Telefónica General Pico, the decision to scrap the existing infrastructure mirrored the company's larger policy intended to undermine workers' historical power. However, because Pico's telefónicos had always "depended on" what happened in Buenos Aires—a result of the centralized collective bargaining infrastructure that dominated from the mid-1900s—they found themselves doubly-vulnerable: facing not just the renewed assault of neoliberal capitalism but also continuing geographic and political marginalization. Paying attention to their experience of privatization complements existing studies by underscoring how, even as politics and collective bargaining occurred at the national level, workers' relationships to the ENTel itself

varied considerably. In doing so, I respond to Ernesto Bohoslavsky's call to take seriously "the geopolitical tensions that operate within the field of historiography."⁵⁵ In this context, capitalist Luddism deepens our understanding of the process of creative destruction by exposing neoliberalism's redistributive, not generative, aspect. Capitalism relentlessly seeks to maximize profits by reducing labor costs, whether through automation or the deskilling (and consequent underpaying) of labor. Privatization, a central feature of neoliberalism, witnessed capital reassert control over areas that had fallen under the state aegis in the mid-twentieth century, including, across much of Latin America, telecommunications.⁵⁶ This had profound impacts in Argentina, as the number of workers in the field plummeted from nearly 41,000 in 1990 to around 20,000 ten years later—of whom less than 20 percent were holdovers from ENTel.⁵⁷ The example of ENTel Pico bears this out, with many of those hired during the 1970s forced out under Telefónica by 2000.

The purpose of this article is not to mourn ENTel's passing, although most subjects did (even as they acknowledged its flaws). Instead, using the concept of capitalist Luddism alongside Harvey's reading of creative destruction enables an initial assessment of the consequences of the neoliberal transformation on workers' understandings of their own value at the local level, outside of Argentina's major cities. Within a larger discussion of technological advancement, obsolescence, and the future of work—the theme of this special issue—historian David Noble's question of "progress for whom" takes on special significance.⁵⁸ Recognizing that, since the 1970s, capitalism's creative destruction has increasingly concentrated wealth and power in the hands of fewer and fewer emphasizes the widening disconnect between capital and labor. This is hardly a novel observation—the very term "capitalist Luddism" deliberately invokes the past. Indeed, part of the concept's utility lies with its capacity to link moments of destruction across multiple centuries by pointing to their overlaps and disconnects (after all, are we not, as historians, always seeking continuity and change?). Even acknowledging the large-scale dangers of what Harvey described as neoliberalism's "vast tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment" sweeping across the globe does not necessarily mean we understand the consequences for actual human beings. The history of Pico's telefónicos suggests that the fallout extends far beyond lost wages or the erosion of benefits. Ultimately, these new relations of capitalism unmake the very social fabric that binds people together.

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Notes

1. Author interviews with Ana Ortíz (May 28, 2015) and Adrián Ramírez (Oct. 29, 2015). Ramírez specifically mentioned tearing up as he watched. All names of interview subjects have been changed.

2. David Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610 (March 2007), 22.
3. On creative destruction, see Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London: Routledge, 1994. See also Harvey, "Neoliberalism," 34.
4. FOETRA is the Federación de Obreros y Empleados Telefónicos de la República Argentina (Federation of Telephone Workers and Employees of the Argentine Republic).
5. Almost all those interviewed remained after privatization, meaning that they worked under both ENTel and Telefónica. This is distinct from the sector as a whole, which saw large numbers of layoffs in the 1990s following the sale of ENTel, and is also different from other public sector industries, like the state oil company. See Agustín Prospitti and Gerónimo Aguilar, "Los trabajadores telefónicos en la Argentina menemista. Una mirada regional a la privatización (resistencias y nuevas condiciones de trabajo): FOETRA Rosario," *Historia Regional, Sección Historia* 27, no. 32 (2014); Dora Orlansky and Andrea Makón, "De la sindicalización a la informalidad. El caso de Repsol - YPF," *Revista Argentina de Sociología* 1, no. 1 (December 2003).
6. Claudio Belini, "Peronismo, nacionalizaciones y sociedades mixtas. El fracaso de la Empresa Mixta Telefónica Argentina, 1946–1948," *Revista de Historia Iberoamericana* 6, no. 2 (2013), 13–14.
7. "ITT-Dietrich-Siemens," *Primera Plana*, no. 500 (Aug. 29, 1972); "La óptica empresaria juzga el mercado argentino," *Redacción*, no. 108 (Feb. 1982); Damián Pierbattisti, "La privatización de ENTEL y la transformación de las identidades en el trabajo: génesis del dispositivo neoliberal en Argentina. 1990–2001," *Documentos de Jóvenes Investigadores* 10, (May 2006), 6–11; Pablo Gerchunoff and Lucas Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto: Un siglo de políticas económicas argentinas*, 2nd. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2010, Chapter 7.
8. See, for example, Jorge Alejandro Walter and Cecilia Senén González, "Empresas y sindicatos en la telefonía argentina privatizada," in *Privatización de las telecomunicaciones en América Latina. Empresas y sindicatos ante los desafíos de la reestructuración*, edited by Jorge Alejandro Walter and Cecilia Senén González. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1998, 3–4.
9. FOET's leader, Luis Gay, later broke with Perón, and after challenging the Peronist takeover of the CGT in 1946, was forced to resign as Secretary General under pressure from Perón and Evita, amid accusations that he was collaborating with foreign interests. See Juan Carlos Torre, "La caída de Luis Gay," *TEH*, no. 89 (October 1974). See also Joel Horowitz, *Argentina's Radical Party and Popular Mobilization, 1916–1930*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2011, esp. Chapter 5.
10. Cecilia Senén González and Alvaro Orsatti, "Confronting the Social and Labour Challenges of Privatisation: Multinational Enterprises in Telecommunications in the 1990s," *International Labour Organization*, 2002; Walter and Senén González, "Empresas y sindicatos."
11. Julieta Bartoletti, "La CGT de los argentinos y los dilemas de la izquierda peronista," *Revista Escuela de Historia* 10, no. 2 (December 2011).
12. Convenio Colectivo 165/1975 (1975). See also John Tuman, "Comparing Modes of Privatisation: A Study of the Telecommunications Sectors in Argentina and Mexico, 1990–2000." *Industrial Relations Journal* 38, no. 2 (2007), 161.
13. This is also a product of Argentina's industrial relations system which, since Peronism, has emphasized the "sindicato único" (sole union) per industry. See Marta Novick, "Nuevas reglas del juego en la Argentina, competitividad y actores sindicales," in *Los sindicatos frente a los procesos de transición política*, edited by Enrique de la Garza Toledo. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2001.
14. See, for example, Peter Ranis, *Class, Democracy, & Labor in Contemporary Argentina*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995, 132–35.
15. Author interviews with Alberto Lamella (Oct. 30, 2015), Osvaldo Santillán (Jun. 26, 2015).
16. Author interview with Lamella. In Spanish, "to intervene" refers to the coercive takeover, usually by the state or the military, of the finances and daily operations of another entity, e.g., a company, union, or local government.
17. Most interviews included accounts of these trainings.
18. Author interviews with Ricardo Carlotti (Jun. 28, 2015) and Humberto Holguín (Oct. 31, 2015). This connection is explicitly made in Harvey, "Neoliberalism," 28. See also Bruno Nápoli, M. Celeste Perosino, and Walter Bosisio, *La dictadura del capital financiero: el golpe militar corporativo y la trama bursátil*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Continente, 2014.
19. Author interview with Carlotti.
20. Author interviews with Lamella, Ortíz (May 28, 2015), Ramírez.

21. This was a frequent topic of media coverage throughout the period, and there remains a broad consensus on the poor level of service. See, among others, Alejandra Herrera, “The Privatization of the Argentine Telephone System,” *CEPAL Review*, no. 47 (1992), esp. 150–52.
22. These details come from author interviews with Lamella, Ortíz (Apr. 3, 2015), and Héctor Pasternak (Jun. 27, 2015), among others. Lamella recalled that even he, working for ENTel, could not get a home phoneline.
23. Author interview with Carlotti.
24. There was, however, an increase in so-called “tertiarization” during this period, which will be discussed in Part II.
25. “Memorias y balances,” Empresa Nacional de Telecomunicaciones (1976–1981, 1984), Library of the Ministry of Economy, Buenos Aires; “Teléfonos: Sabemos que no sabemos,” *La Reforma* (April 2, 1977); Lucas Daniel Iramain, “La política laboral de la última dictadura cívico-militar argentina en el ámbito de las empresas públicas. Los casos de ENTel, Gas del Estado, y Ferrocarriles Argentinos (1976–1983).” *Anuario IEHS* 29/30 (2014): 71–96; Sandra Wolanski, “Un sindicato que *lucha*. Narrativas del pasado y construcciones morales entre los activistas del sindicato de las telecomunicaciones de Buenos Aires, Argentina,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Antropología de Trabajo*, no. 2 (2017). Scholars tend to locate the origins of ENTel’s privatization in the dictatorship’s tertiarization policies. See, for example, Tuman, “Comparing Modes”; Herrera, “Privatization.”
26. Herrera, “Privatization,” 152.
27. Author interview with Carlotti.
28. Author interview with Pasternak.
29. On Plan Megatel’s failure, see Herrera, “Privatization.”
30. See, among others, Paul Beckerman, “Central-Bank ‘Distress’ and Hyperinflation in Argentina, 1989–1990,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 3 (October 1993); Jennifer Adair, *In Search of the Lost Decade: Everyday Rights in Postdictatorship Argentina*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020.
31. On the Menem era, see Eduardo Basualdo, *Sistema político y modelo de acumulación en la Argentina*. 2nd. Bernal, Pvcia. de Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2002; Daniel Azpiazu and Eduardo Basualdo, “Las privatizaciones en la Argentina: genesis, desarrollo, y principales impactos estructurales,” in *Las privatizaciones y la desnacionalización de América Latina*, edited by James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer. Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2004; Hernán Fair, “Claves para entender el éxito de la hegemonía menemista en la Argentina neoliberal de los años ‘90.” *Sociologías* 16, no. 37 (December 2014); Adrián Piva, “El modo de acumulación de capital en Argentina (1989 – 2015),” *Revista Ensamblés* 3, no. 6 (Fall 2017); Martín Rodríguez and Pablo Touzon, *¿Qué hacemos con Menem? Los noventa veinte años después*, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2021.
32. Walter and Senén González, “Empresas y sindicatos,” 3–4.
33. Herrera, “Privatization”
34. See, among many, Herrera, “Privatization”; Peter Calvert, “Privatisation in Argentina,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 15, no. 2 (1996); Walter and Senén González, “Empresas y sindicatos”; Iramain, “La política laboral”; Pierbattisti, “La privatización”; Prospitti and Aguilar, “Los trabajadores telefónicos.”
35. Pierbattisti, “La privatización,” 7–8.
36. Wolanski, “Un sindicato que *lucha*.” See also Tuman, “Comparing Modes,” 164–65.
37. The idea that Argentine workers remember 1990 as *the* traumatic moment of their lives (rather than, say, the most recent dictatorship) has increasingly gained traction in other cases. See, for example, Marina Negri, “Entrar en la fábrica para huir del temor. Vida cotidiana de los/las trabajadores/as ‘comunes’ de una fábrica autoperartista (Gran Buenos Aires, 1974– 1983),” in *Historia y Memoria de la represión contra los trabajadores en Argentina: Consentimiento, oposición y vida cotidiana (1974– 1983)*, edited by Emilio Crenzel and Camillo Robertini. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2022.
38. Harvey, “Neoliberalism,” 14.
39. Media criticism of ENTel appeared regularly throughout the period. For a representative example, see “Un dolor de cabeza nacional,” *Somos* (Dec. 17, 1976).
40. Some scholars, however, have argued that Argentine telecommunications did improve by the late 1990s. See Walter and Senén González, “Empresas y sindicatos.”
41. Author interview with Vicente Galdós (Jun. 26, 2015).
42. See, for example, Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

43. Ranis, *Class, Democracy, & Labor*, 132–34.
44. Alessandro Portelli, “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991.
45. Laura Jane Smith and Gary Campbell, “‘Nostalgia for the Future’: Memory, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Class.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 7 (2017).
46. Smith and Campbell, “Nostalgia for the Future,” 613.
47. Author interviews with Lamella and Carlotti.
48. Tuman, “Comparing Modes,” 164–165; Walter and Senén González, “Empresas y sindicatos,” 2.
49. Author interview with Santillán.
50. Author interview with Ortíz.
51. For more on neoliberalism’s effects on self-perception and interpersonal relationships, see David Fryer and Rose Stambe, “Neoliberal Austerity and Unemployment,” *The Psychologist...* 27, no. 4 (April 2014).
52. Harvey, “Neoliberalism,” 36.
53. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Pantheon Books, 1964.
54. David Noble, *Progress without People: In Defense of Luddism*, Chicago, IL: Charles Kerr Publishing Company, 1993.
55. Ernesto Bohoslavsky, “Debates y conflictos de la historia regional de la Argentina actual,” *Quinto Sol* 22, no. 3 (December 2018).
56. See, for example, Raines. “Privatization of Telecommunications.”
57. Tuman, “Comparing Modes,” 167–68; Prospitti and Aguilar, “Los trabajadores telefónicos.”
58. Noble, *Progress Without People*, 91.