This chapter will center on two life histories of women workers with migratory experiences during the same historical period but whose local historical and personal contexts were extremely distinct and provided different conditions of possibility for class resistance and activism. The object of the article is to show how material economic conditions and the production of coherence in personal experience explain the greater or lesser presence of political activism, and the particular form that it takes, locally.

As a theoretical framework I will be using Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of “habitus” and its incorporation as durable dispositions, as it is applied to the conditioning of expectations for a better future and its tension with the power of the symbolic domain in providing the tools for envisioning the transformation of existing structures (2003). For Bourdieu, in a situation where the lack of a future becomes an expanding experience for many people, it is the relative autonomy of the symbolic order that can “provide some margin of freedom for a political action that may reopen the space of possibles. By being capable of manipulating expectations and hopes, particularly through a performative evocation more or less inspired and exciting of the future . . . symbolic power can introduce some play in the correspondence between hopes and chances opening thus a space of freedom by positing, in a more or less voluntaristic fashion, more or less improbable possibles, utopia, project, program or plan, that the pure logic of probabilities would lead to hold as practically excluded.” (336–337). Political mobilization in this view hinges on the production of this “margin of freedom” through symbolic struggles. The major stake of these symbolic struggles being that “the belief that this or that future, desired or feared, is possible, probable or inevitable, may, in certain conjunctures, mobilize
around it a group of people, and contribute in this form to facilitate or obstruct the coming of this future” (338). The question, however, remains of how and under which historical circumstances the creation of a margin of freedom becomes possible. An additional question is that of the connection between particular habitus, with their reproductive tendency to support a “causality of the probable,” and the different forms and modes that the “more or less improbable possibles” can take in their symbolic emergence. This differentiality will in turn orient the mobilization forms available for individual subjects.

At this point I will be turning to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectuals that have “worked out and made coherent the principles and the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity, thus constituting a cultural and social bloc” (1987: 330). In this Gramscian view, organic intellectuals of the working class are essential elements for effecting the transcendence of common sense into a philosophy of praxis enabling the production of a historical bloc and guiding the struggle for hegemony (346). From this perspective, then, there is a particular work that has to be done in order for workers’ experience of exploitation to become coherent in a collective way.

The articulation of Bourdieu and Gramsci will provide me with a framework to compare two rather different situations in contemporary Spain, both dealing with the life and struggles of women trying to produce a better future. I now turn to the particular cases.

### Setting 1: The Case of Catral (SE Spain)

The first area I will present is located to the southwest of Valencia, in the Vega Baja del Segura (Alicante province). Some historical factors about the region are important to the understanding of particular trajectories of working class women and their attempts to control their lives.

Irrigated and interspersed with barren scrublands, this area had a historical pattern of pluriactivity and active commercial agriculture since the eighteenth century. A few large absentee landowners held most of the land and managed it through large tenants that in turn rented some small plots (less than what was needed for a family to subsist on) to subtenants. The latter were thus tied to the land and became “stable” day laborers indentured through their debt of the subtenancy. Large parts of the local population, however, were “free” day laborers. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) more than 70 percent of the local population consisted of daily hired laborers, without access to land. The patterns of mutual responsibility that developed were very different for the
“tied” and “free” laborers, the former strongly dependent on particularistic patronage links, the latter increasingly organized in terms of a homogeneous, politicized working class ideology. We have dealt elsewhere in detail with the local processes of differentiation that the unequal development of capitalism in Spain and the forms of political regulation produced for this region (Narotzky and Smith 2006). Here I want to stress how these produced differently situated groups of people in the region that had heterogeneous notions of solidarity and responsibility—toward their family, their peers, their employers or employees. As a result, strategies became available for thought and action from within different, historically construed, cultural and sociological positions.

In the late 1970s the Fordist footwear industry that had developed in the local town of Elche was restructured as a dispersed network of subcontracting small firms, workshops, sweatshops, middlemen, and home workers. In this conjuncture, the particular way in which personal responsibilities and moral obligation became entangled in the development of a “regional economy” was not homogeneous locally, and could be referred to past histories of differentiation but also past histories of producing consent and struggle, and of managing dissent. While unions became very active in the industrial town of Elche (Benton 1990) up to the late 1970s, they did not re-emerge in the rural agricultural areas. There, the pattern of social relations that became hegemonic was that of dependent links and patron-client networks of “favors.” Moreover, the crisis of the footwear industry in the mid 1970s was credited by local subjects both to the international economic conjuncture and to the national political transition process (1975–1982) that legalized class unions and unleashed a period of sustained strikes. The subsequent reorganization of footwear production in a dispersed network of small—mostly informal—units of production, including large amounts of home workers, was predicated upon a discourse voiced by entrepreneurs, and shared by many workers, about the responsibility of union claims and unrest that had “caused” entrepreneurs to close down their large factories. In this conjuncture, the dispersed and informal structure of production enhanced personalized modes of dealing with structural suffering that referred to the local memories and past experience of dependent agricultural labor (Narotzky and Smith 2006), but were nevertheless often inflected by a consciousness of class dignity, as the following case illustrates. These points are also underscored by Leach (chapter 9) who stresses the centrality of particular work histories.

It is this region and its footwear production sector that was defined in the 1990s as a particularly “successful” industrial district by local actors such as union leaders, regional government agents, and entrepreneurs.
Social scientists, however, exposed mixed feelings about these “local economies,” both applauding the use of social capital for industrial development while pointing to the lack of local institutional structures that would enhance its potentialities (Ybarra 2001, 2003). Writing in 2004, a group of social scientists describe the region’s footwear sector as one in crisis, regionally sustained by the use of 52 percent of informal labor in its production process, thus obtaining a cut of around 15 percent in labor costs that makes it marginally competitive (Ybarra et al. 2004: 33–51).

Conchita: Multiple Migration
Patterns and the Limits of Dignity

I will start with an ethnographic vignette of the struggles to earn a livelihood and retain some sense of dignity of Conchita and her husband in the Vega Baja del Segura (Alicante).

Conchita started working when she was eleven years old as a maid. When she was twenty-four she married a jornalero (day laborer) and started working in a canning factory in the nearby village of Dolores. When the drought years (1959–1961 and 1964–1966) came the consequences for local agriculture were dramatic (Olcina Cantos 2001; Morales Gil, Olcina Cantos, and Rico Amorós 1999; Olcina Cantos and Rico Amorós 1995). The 1966 drought was particularly significant in that it mobilized peasants in the area: many decided to migrate to the expanding industrial urban centers, while others organized to demand for water regulation policies in the face of increased demand of the agricultural irrigation system and of the expanding local urban and tourist resort areas. The government responded with the decree allowing the transfer of water from the Tajo river to the Segura river in 1968, a highly polemic waterworks project.

Conchita and her husband decided to migrate to the then expanding footwear industry in Elche. In Elche, however, her husband found it difficult adapting to the routines of factory work and felt cut off from the reciprocity networks in their hometown Catral. So they returned and she got a job at the canning factory again. Her husband began to go to France as a migrant agricultural worker in the early 1970s. He migrated to the town of Marguerittes (about 8500 inhabitants in the region of Languedoc-Roussillon, Gard department), known for wine and other horticultural produces. Many local young men were going to this particular area, sometimes seasonally for the grape harvest, while others would stay for the year, moving around with seasonal agricultural jobs or working steadily for a particular farmer. During this period Conchita’s mother took care of her children and cooked for her while she went to her job at the canning factory. This
arrangement seems to have worked for a couple of years but then her husband had a serious confrontation over wages with his employer in France. Conchita recounts: “My husband argued [with the boss] that he was entitled to know what he was going to get paid by the hour in order to see if it was worth it to have left his wife back home, working in Dolores, and his children . . . because if he was to die of hunger he preferred to die in his village, he wasn’t going to die in a foreign country” (fieldnotes, 1995). The conflict brought him back to his village where he started to get some work in construction in the slack agricultural season.

After a few years of working as a mason in the early 1980s her husband got seriously ill with cancer. This coincided with the closing of the canning factory. Conchita was able to find home work finishing heels at piece rates in the informal footwear manufacturing network. She did this work not only to survive but to give her children better chances in life—through higher education. Conchita expresses a strong feeling that her family was caught in a frenetic cycle that was not moving them forward. Somehow her work needed to be transformed into some longer-term investment in the future; for her this becomes condensed in the idea of formal education for her children.

For Conchita and her husband, their sense of self-respect informed much of their actions and guided a particular individually confrontational way of dealing with a life of extremely constricted opportunity. While they were aware that they had to accept exploitative relations with those who had the power and the resources, they were not prepared to go beyond the threshold of self-respect. Similarly, in chapter 7 Barber discusses the muting of particular class performances. An understanding of the extension of political activism beyond formal politics is also discussed by Zontini in chapter 5.

Setting 2: The Case of Ferrol (NW Spain)

Ferrol in the region of Galicia (northwest coast of Spain, north of Portugal) is a coastal town that has been centered on the ship-building industry for more than three centuries. Ferrol was until the 1990s a town centered around the shipyards. It was also a naval garrison with military of all graduations living in special quarters with their families. However, because of the shipyards, Ferrol had a mass of specialized laborers that became strongly unionized at the turn of the twentieth century. The shipyards were a state industry and produced military and civil ships. Labor was highly specialized and was formally apprenticed at the shipyard school for four years before being admitted to the shipyard as workers. The shipyard
had a tradition of strong workers’ unions since the nineteenth century and work conditions and work pay defined them as privileged and with a high job security (“almost like civil servants”). Indeed, after the Spanish Civil War, even though most workers had been active on the republican side fighting against Franco, most of them went back to their jobs and were not repressed. Specialized workers were needed in the shipyard. This situation of stability and relative privilege lasted until the 1980s and was crucial in the re-emergence of a clandestine but very active class-based workers’ union during the dictatorship in the early 1960s. Union activism reorganized by taking advantage of the corporatist union framework “Sindicato vertical” (vertical union), mostly a strategy of the communist union Comisiones Obreras (CCOO). This union became the guiding light of the entire working class in Ferrol and was very active at organizing and solidarizing shipyard workers with other local industries’ workers.

After the “transition” to democracy, the first socialist government of Felipe González started a restructuring of all national state industries: unemployment and early retirement became a generalized feature in the region, as well as the closure of job opportunities in the shipyard for the younger generation. During that same period the unions became bureaucratized and part of a neo-corporatist compact (Pacto de la Moncloa) oriented toward enhancing productivity and generally the competitive aspect of Spanish economy, preparing for Spain’s incorporation into the European Economic Community. This trend has continued until the present, with various moments of restructuring and job loss, ending in 2005 with the virtual privatization of the shipyard. The present-day structure of the local shipyard industry is one of medium and small enterprises located in the premises of the original public shipyard but independent from the main company, subcontracted to do the various production processes involved. Workers that had stable jobs in the “old” public shipyard are now dismissed from the main company and re-employed by some of the small subcontracted shops, with precarious, task-related contracts. Parallel to this transformation, the region has experienced the spectacular increase of small to medium enterprises (SME), mostly in the textile- and garment-production and service sectors in new industrial parks surrounding the town of Ferrol. These “new” jobs are addressed mostly to women and younger people and are highly volatile and unprotected. There is almost no unionization or collective action in this new area of employment: a stronger sense of individual strategizing and networking as the main instrument of social mobility seem to be at work. In economic terms there is a demise of the “big” traditional shipyard industry and an emergence of a “flexible” model of SME, regionally integrated in both the shipyard industry and other (textile/service) industries.
Gelines: Becoming a Union Organizer in Ferrol and Paris

Gelines’s story is very different from Conchita’s. In the 1960s when Gelines starts her working life at age twelve, the town is divided between the military aristocracy who keep to themselves and the shipyard workers who are the main income earners in most working families. Auxiliary industries subcontracted by the shipyard also give jobs to many (mostly male) workers. Aside from the shipyard industry there is an important processing industry related to fisheries, where mostly women work. The 1960s is historically the period when the working class starts to reorganize after the first twenty years of Francoist repression. Ferrol and Asturias are the two strongholds of this reorganization around the emergent (communist) union of Comisiones Obreras. It is essential to note that the shipyard workers are the organizing elements in the class movement. They are perceived by workers of other industries as their guides, not only in a pedagogical sense but also in a strategic sense. I have dwelt elsewhere on the role of organic intellectuals articulating the memory of republican class struggles and organization to present-day struggles and organization (Narotzky 2004). What I want to highlight here is the centrality of the union’s restructuring of “class” as a concept to be used both in the analysis of present realities and in the active mobilization toward transforming social relations of production.

We will see how this structures Gelines’s life story in a very different way from Conchita’s. Gelines started working when she was a child of twelve loading coal into boats of the Navy. As soon as she could legally get an apprenticeship contract (at age fourteen) she found a job at a preserve factory salting cod. The cod was fished in Terranova, salted in Ferrol, and exported to Brazil. The work was very hard physically and “morally”: “It was like a whip,” she says: “you unloaded trucks, you pieced the fish, you worked in the cold-storage room at −25ºC.” During the first four years she earned an apprenticeship salary although she was fully trained in a few months. It is during this period that she was “recruited” (captar) by a communist neighbor, Manuel, a fisherman, who “initiated” (iniciar) her into a particular understanding of social relations: those articulated around the concept of “class.” It is worth noting that this fisherman was the father of a shipyard worker, Rafael, who was to be the main leader of the 1960s union struggle within the shipyard.

In any case, Gelines, together with some of her male coworkers at the factory, organizes a shop-floor section of the communist union (CCOO) and starts claims for better working conditions. We must bear in mind that class-based unions were banned from Francoist Spain. In 1967, a year of strikes in the shipyard, 250 women are fired from the fish-processing
factory. Gelines, the union shop steward, is among them but refuses to accept the final settlement (*finiquito*). The police make an enquiry about the union at the factory and she is taken to the police station and later on to jail. The shipyard union workers organize a general strike in support of the fired women and against the repression of unionized workers, and as a result fourteen people are tried in Madrid by the Tribunal de Orden Público (TOP) in charge of repression. Gelines is the only woman and the only one from her factory. At the trial, only she and another worker are sentenced to more than a year in jail; the rest are acquitted. While in prison she considers moving to France, with a sister who lives there, but when she gets out she thinks she must go back to the factory, not run away. She says she wanted to leave things “tied up” before leaving, she did it for her coworkers in order to show the strength of organized struggle, and also so that the bosses didn’t think she had been broken and discouraged. After four months she went to France, but she left her factory union well organized.

It was 1970 by then, the moment of the great Spanish migration to France and other northern European countries. Gelines went to Paris and after working at several odd jobs she finally found a stable job as a waitress at the Lutetia Hotel in Paris, where she worked until her retirement. There she immediately entered the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) union and became an active shop steward and organized some strikes. In 1990 she retired and came back to Ferrol.

### Different Experiences of Class

The two cases I have presented are very different in their modes of articulating migration with class and gender. Conchita’s experience appears to be much more fragmented and although class seems to be clearly an operative concept in her analysis of the relations of production, it operates more as constituting the limits to self-respect than as a mobilizing element. While in the Vega Baja’s agriculture industry *jornaleros* had been extremely well organized around the (socialist) UGT and (anarchist) Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) unions during the Republic, after the Civil War the rural sections of the unions only reorganized very weakly. Although the *jornaleros* kept a memory of class that oriented their analysis, solidarity, self-respect, and cultural aspirations, they never reorganized a structure of class mobilization. In the late 1960s and early 1970s it was the massive migration to the nearby industrial town of Elche to work in the shoe factories that renewed their contact with effective structures of class mobilization (basically CCOO). This related with the general urban- and industry-oriented mobilization strategies of the unions (mostly
the communist CCOO) during the 1960s and early 1970s. So there is a connection that appears in between class as a structure for mobilization through the unions and industrial and/or urban locations in this historical period. And the memory of class in the agricultural context of the Vega Baja seems to evolve more as a setting of the limits of dignity. Conchita’s husband migrates to France as an agricultural worker while she stays, but then turns back because he prefers to be exploited at home. It is obvious that he does not get involved with local unions as did most of those that migrated to take industrial jobs in northern Europe. His understanding of his position as exploited labor in France leads him to individual action: return. The subsequent work history of Conchita as a homeworker for middlemen in the shoe-making subcontracting network of the Vega Baja is one that very clearly expresses this duality of class analysis and class dignity without an organized structure of class mobilization. This is a situation that leads her to invest all her energy in attaining social mobility for the next generation, through proper formal education credentials. In order to attain this she is willing to let herself be exploited, up to the outmost limit of dignity but not beyond.

The case of Gelines is entirely different. It is set in an urban context with a strong labor movement tradition centered on the shipyards. Although repression during and after the Civil War was also very important here, several elements were crucial in allowing for the re-constitution of an organized labor movement. First, the need for a specialized and trained labor force restrained massive layoffs at the shipyards after the war, which enabled the generation of those who entered as apprentices in the 1950s to be trained both technically and politically by workers who had the experience of class union organization and mobilization. Second, the strategy of the communist party and its union CCOO favored the policy of “entrismo,” having people from the communist union participate in the official corporatist union elections in order to fight the vertical union from within. This gave voice to the workers’ unions and made public their analysis in terms of class (this was true for CCOO and USO, while UGT had the opposed strategy of non-participation). And finally, there was the fact that shipyard unions’ leaders acted as organic intellectuals of the local working class as a whole, and actively encouraged class solidarity in the struggles that involved the different industries in the area.

Gelines’s working life is, from the start, structured by an understanding of class that is inherently tied to its organization for active mobilization and the collective struggle for economic, social, and political claims. In her case dignity is tied to an organized labor movement. It is worth noting, however, that after her migration to France it is not until she gets to work in a large firm that she can get involved in organized class struggle once more, thus
hinting at the obstructive effect of small, particularized and often domestic workspaces for collective mobilization (see also Barber, chapter 7).

How do migratory experiences affect these women’s forms of resistance to exploitation? How do mobility and fixity articulate with the production of a conscious experience of class? How does this relate to people’s ability to imagine a different future and act to produce it?

In the case of Conchita, the various migration movements through which she and her husband try to control their miserable life expectations seem to increase their sense of insecurity and constant humiliation. In the case of Gelines, migration transforms the location of her struggles against exploitation but not the modes of action that rely on working-class collective mobilization through a union structure. For Conchita and her husband mobility appears as forced displacement—although it is freely chosen—that disrupts the solidarity patterns linked to kinship and locality, tied to personal responsibility, individual effort, and emotional care. For Gelines, on the contrary, mobility—although responding to political repression—appears as an opportunity to better economic and social conditions because solidarity patterns are based on a strong ideology and practice of collective and universal class arguments. This does not preclude the instrumental use of personal networks (she initially goes to her sister’s place in France), but it orients her vision of the future differently.

It is as if the point of fixity anchoring Gelines’s sense of direction in life is the concept of “class” as a collective sense of responsibility guiding action and mutual care, transcending personalized and localized links. But it is paradoxical and revealing of class movements that this very de-localized framework is strongly dependent on a local history not just of class organization and mobilization, but also of an active group of organic intellectuals forming the local working class in particular “modern” and “universalistic” socialist interpretations of reality and how to deal with it. Organic intellectuals of the working class were missing in the rural Vega Baja, due to the differential, particular, and localized patterns that Francoist repression took in Spain. This pedagogical function, then, was completely absent there and hence the point of fixity orienting people’s lives became the material location in space, enabling close, face-to-face networks of personal responsibility.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion I would say that what seems to have affected the conditions of possibility of these women’s modes of resistance to exploitation is the very material basis of the structure of production together with the
strategic decisions of political institutions, including clandestine parties and unions that were often tied to an international decision-making center, such as was the case with CCOO.5 But it was also, I think, the emergence of local organic intellectuals who often became leaders that turned the individual experience of suffering into a meaningful framework for collective action through critical analysis and education. In Ferrol, these organic intellectuals that actively sought to link a memory of class struggles to the reconstitution of class organizations and present-day struggles were crucial elements for the emergence of a philosophy of praxis that oriented action through collective mobilization (Narotzky 2004; for philosophy of praxis, see Gramsci 1987: 323–377). But the reason why these intellectuals emerged in Ferrol and did not emerge in the Vega Baja is linked to the particular structure of the shipbuilding heavy industry, its secular history of collective action and the specialized and qualified nature of labor that set a check to repression within the local workforce after the Civil War (1936–1939). In the Vega Baja, although there was a history of labor mobilization in the urban footwear factories since the early nineteenth century (Moreno Saez 1987), the less specialized nature of the work and the systematic use of rural workers as an alternative workforce in different conjunctures (economic, political), inhibited the emergence of a long-lasting strand of organic intellectuals, even more so in the rural areas where pluriactivity was the norm (Narotzky and Smith 2006). Labrecque (in chapter 10) also discusses the historical development of locally distinct production structures and their effect on worker mobilization.

I am aware that the ethnographic comparison that I present supports a very traditional perspective of what indeed favors class mobilization. Forms of resistance and mobilization against exploitation seem conditioned by the structure of expectations and objective possibilities that make workers’ daily experiences. In his Méditations pascaliennes (2003) Bourdieu makes the point that people’s practical sense of the future, their hopes of a better life, their investments in terms of continuous oriented action are attuned to the objective possibilities allowed by the social and economic framework of their existence. The habitus here is the expression of the limits that frame future expectations and therefore condition the modes of mobilization in the present for a future (see also Lem, chapter 8). Differentiation is thus structurally incorporated when future expectations and decisions about personal investments toward change take form.

But I want to stress another factor of Bourdieu’s analysis: the connection between the practical ability to make the future—the capacity to preoccupy one’s mind with it in the present—and uncertainty. If every
engagement and investment toward the future is associated with uncertainty, it is always a bounded space of uncertainty, limited and regulated by a particular habitus. This is what Bourdieu terms “la causalité du probable” (2003: 332) where “will adjusts to possibilities” (312). However, Bourdieu points to the fact that “absolute uncertainty” destroys the capacity to produce “reasonable expectations” and is the mark of a situation where those holding power can change the rules at any moment, “manipulating fear and hope” (331) through the modification of objective chances.

Thus the ways in which people get a hold of their future through mobilization in the present is structurally tied to the limits of uncertainty that are materially produced by economic and political agents in history.

This is what our cases seem to support: the more uncertainty is produced, the less capacity to orient personal action toward a future expectation. One of the main objectives of an emancipatory action would be, then, to produce some limits to uncertainty. Gramscian “organic intellectuals” seem to have such a function, but also working class institutions, such as the unions, may serve that purpose. In a context without any of them, mobilization becomes an individual struggle for survival, through tactics that enforce resignation in the present and acceptance of exploitation, in exchange for future generations’ social mobility.

Notes

I want to acknowledge research funds provided by the Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología (Spain), project BSO2003–06832 and project SEJ2007–66633 of the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (Spain).

1. The fieldwork in this region was conducted in 1978–1979 by Gavin Smith (University of Toronto) and in 1995–1996 by Gavin Smith and myself. A monograph (Narotzky and Smith 2006) has resulted from this collaborative long-term work.

2. Other unions will contribute as well to the re-emergent class politics, mainly the UGT (socialist), and the USO (catholic) unions.

3. The firm refuses to hire her but the shipyard union again mobilizes people in solidarity and she is finally rehired.

4. The shipyard is finished by 1751 and in 1760 already has 4600 workers. The first strike is in 1795.

5. Leaders of the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) union, attached to the communist party, were often sent to East Germany to be trained. General strategic decisions about the union’s interventions (i.e., its participation in the “vertical” corporatist union during the dictatorship [1939–1975]) were a part of the communist party’s orientations and were dependent on Soviet international politics.
References


