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NATs: working children's identity

The particular case of the Bolivian working children's union within the Western child labour discourse

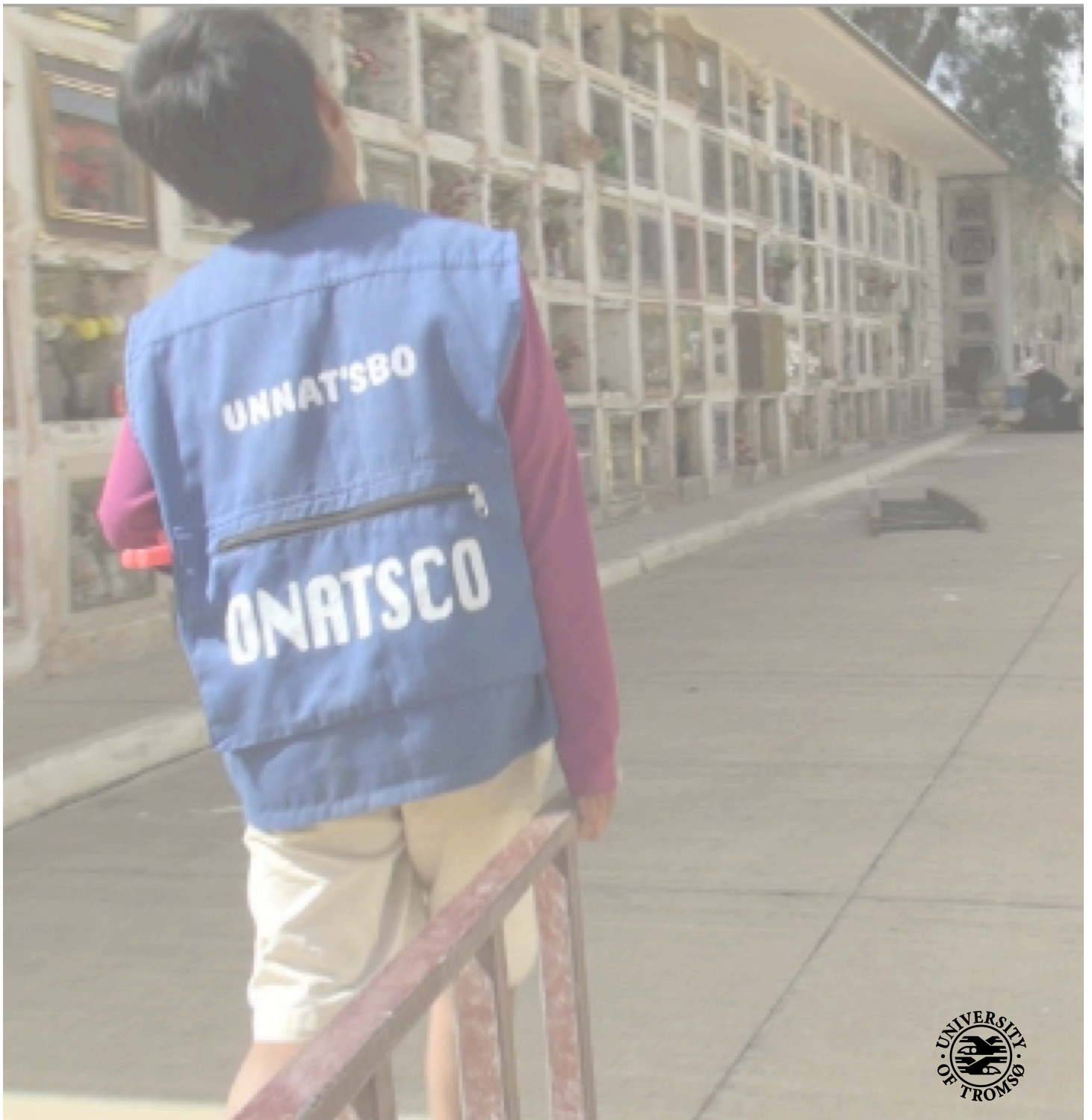
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Abstract

According to the International Labour Organization, more than 850'000 children execute lucrative activities in Bolivia. Through the Western discourse on child labour, children who work are often specifically characterized and connected with negative terms such as exploitation and poverty. The Bolivian working children have created their own labour union, the UNATsBO, in order to defend their right to work and to promote a positive perception on children's work. After years of demands from the UNATsBO, the Bolivian government promulgated a new law authorizing children's work under the age of 14 in July 2014. I conducted fieldwork from May to August 2014 with children affiliated to the local sub-group of the UNATsBO in Cochabamba.

In this thesis I describe the children's work life in a cemetery and in a market place and their role as UNATsBO representatives during the negotiation around the new law. From a methodological point of view, I describe the strategies to gather some bits of the children's lives using a video camera.

This work is about the incongruence between the West's attitude towards child labour as a global issue, and the reality experienced on a daily basis by children working in the surroundings of Cochabamba.

Keywords: child labour, child work, childhood studies, critical evaluation of child labour, agency, empowerment

Abbreviations

AVE	Audiovisuales Educativos “audiovisual educative tools”, a private educational institution working with child workers in Cochabamba
ILO	International Labour Organization
NATs	Niños, niñas y adolescentes trabajadores Working children and adolescents
ONATsCO	<i>Organización de niños, niñas y adolescentes trabajadores de Cochabamba</i> Cochabamba Working children and adolescent’s organization
UNICEF	United Nation’s Children Fund
UNATsBO	<i>Unión de niños, niñas y adolescentes trabajadores de Bolivia</i> Bolivia’s working children and adolescent’s union

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Prologue

A sunny late afternoon at the Cemetery of Sacaba

(Cochabamba department, central Bolivia).

I am here for the first time alone, without the educator from the institution AVE, who introduced me first to this place. I meet Felix in the cemetery. He is wearing a blue working vest that fits him perfectly. Felix is short, but from my point of view Bolivian children look younger than they are. We walk through the cemetery and he introduces it to me while I am filming.

Felix: "Is Maria of AVE your cousin?"

Me: "No, she is a friend."

Felix: "But what are you doing?"

Me: "I am studying."

Felix: "What are you studying for?"

Me: "I study to make documentary films. About working children."

Felix: "Really? But there where you come from, children do work?"

Me: "Not much. It's not like here."

Felix: "But there are children who work there?"

Me: "They don't work like here. Sometimes they work a little bit, for some pocket money. But it's not exactly the same because usually the parents have enough money for them so they don't need to work."

Felix: "Parents have enough money?"

Me: "Yes, they have to have money for their children. And if they don't have, the government will take care of them. So the children don't need to work. It's forbidden to make children work. Actually, it's also forbidden here, but here, children still work, isn't?"

Felix stops walking and looks up to me with a nervous gaze.

Felix: "Here it's not forbidden to work."

Me: "Someway it is. The law says that kids under 14 are not allowed to work. How old are you?"

Felix: "11."

Me: "So they don't really see you as a worker, you are not allowed to work."

Felix: "But we don't do anything bad. We are just singing!"

Felix is not scared. He starts to laugh, says that this is weird and continues walking through the cemetery to show me his favourite destroyed old graves.

1 Introduction

Between May and August 2014 I visited Felix and his co-workers often on a regular basis. This was one part of the anthropological fieldwork I conducted in Bolivia. The goal was to investigate the lives of working children, but specifically focus on the Bolivian Working children's union, the UNATsBO (*Unión de niños, niñas y adolescentes trabajadores de Bolivia* – Working children and adolescent's union of Bolivia) using the video camera as a tool to elicit knowledge, but also to produce a 30 minutes documentary and ethnographic film, that would convey the children's point of view upon their work and the role of work in their lives. The working children I met in Bolivia are to some extent members or are affiliated to the UNATsBO and call themselves NATs: *niños y adolescentes trabajadores* – working children and adolescents.

In the West, 'child labour' is a concept, that pretends to address the situation of all the children who work in the whole world, but at the same time imposes a negative gaze upon them by connoting it to negative terms such as exploitation, slavery or abuse. While being in the field I could experience how incongruous this Western concept is to the reality my main informants are living in.

In this thesis I deconstruct the broad Western discourse on child labour as it applies to some particular cases in Bolivia: The UNATsBO and its Cochamamba delegation ONATsCO (*Organización de Niños y Adolescentes Trabajadores de Cochabamba* – Organization of the working children and adolescents of Cochabamba), the children working as wheelbarrow pushers at the Feria America market in Cochabamba and the children working as prayer-boys and girls, singers and grave polishers in the cemetery of Sacaba.

I also relate the meeting the unionized children had in the senate in La Paz at this time. This meeting led to a modification in the law concerning children and employment and made Bolivia the first country in the world to legally authorize lucrative work for children under 14 years old.

In this Master project I experimented with the possibilities a video camera offers in order to elicit, produce and convey knowledge about complex issues. The fieldwork was conducted using methods of visual anthropology and filmmaking. With the camera and the medium film I tried to give the children a channel to express themselves without any constraint, in order to uncover how their need to "*realize self-esteem through paid work*

impinges upon the moral condemnation of child labor as one of the fundamental principles of modernity.” (Nieuwenhuys 1998: 247)

The theoretical part of the thesis starts with a selective definition of childhood. The basic question ‘What is a child’ is answered and questioned through the work of different scholars, from a historical and sociological point of view. In the following section, the questions of where and how the sphere of childhood is defined, and what Western society imposes to the rest of the world as an “ideal childhood” are raised.

The following chapter is concerned with deconstructing the term child labour. The gaze of Western society upon the phenomena of working children is analysed and described as the ‘child labour discourse’. The last section of this sub-chapter focus on the topic of the legislation related to children’s work. In this last part I also start the explanation of the new Bolivian law concerning child worker’s right, whose making and approval in the Bolivian parliament I could witness during my fieldwork.

The last section of the theory chapter is dedicated to the critical evaluation of child labour and the subject-oriented research that goes hand in hand with it. I explain the more recent approach and point of view on children’s work that emerged from Manfred Liebel’s work and how children’s point of view and the positive aspects of their work should be taken into account in order to do research on this phenomenon.

In a next step, I am introducing the methods used for this thesis. The first section portrays how I entered the field with a video camera, and how I developed strategies to approach the children with it. In this part I also explain different issues I had to face when getting in contact with some working children. The ways I filmed and gathered material is described in the following section. In the end of this chapter I describe with a practical example how I succeed to gather specific knowledge through giving the children much power and freedom of expression, but also tools and possibilities.

Chapter 4 introduces the field of my research: the world of the working children in Cochabamba. In this chapter I portray AVE (Audiovisuales Educativos), the institution, which works actively with the working children and who were my gatekeepers, and the ONATsCO, the working children’s organization of Cochabamba. The following steps are dedicated to the two main “sub-fields” where I investigated children’s work: the Satur-

day's market Feria America and the graveyard in the neighbouring town Sacaba. In the same chapter I also depict different trips to La Paz that the representative children of Cochabamba were taking in order to meet the national representatives of the UNATsBO and representatives of the Bolivian senate. The last section of this chapter describes another "sub-field" I identified, the one of the local and international media. In this part I tell the different experiences the representative children had with local and international media (radios, TV and newspapers) I could witness.

The last chapter of the thesis goes more in depth of the subject and raises questions by connecting the different aspects described throughout the thesis. The first section concerns schooling – a topic that is not directly mentioned in the whole thesis until this section. But schooling is an important point that needs discussion, since the opposition 'children's work vs. school' is a recurrent pattern in the child labour discourse and school is often seen as an *antidote* to child labour by modern Western society. The last section of this chapter portrays my findings. Through describing the identity children gain and the recognition they receive from society by defining themselves as NATs, I show how 'NATs' becomes a new status that is meant to help the working children to fight society's misunderstandings towards them.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Childhood: definitions

2.1.1 The invention of childhood

Child labour – we often hear these words and think we know what they mean. In fact we understand the concept of 'childhood' – and what it means for children to work – from the perspective of modern occidental society. This thesis will begin by examining definitions of these key concepts.

What is a child? The historian Philippe Ariès was the first social scientist to confront this question in any depth. In his book "Centuries of Childhood" (Ariès 1996) he affirms that "Childhood" was invented in 15th century Western Europe. Previous to this period, according to Ariès, in Europe children were perceived as 'small adults'. His thesis is based

on analysis of paintings of this time, in which children were literally pictured as small sized adults, with the same clothes, posture and musculature.

“It [the pictorial representation of children before the 15th century] suggests [too] that in the realm of real life, and not simply in that of aesthetic transposition, childhood was a period of transition which passed quickly and which was just as quickly forgotten.” (Ariès 1996: 32)

According to Ariès, the word “child” did not have the restricted meaning it has today. The word child would have mostly been used in the same way as the word “lad” (Ariès 1996: 125). He also stresses that childhood should not be confused here with ‘affection for children’. Childhood corresponds merely to *“an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult.”* (Ariès 1996: 125)

Objects, connected to children, such as certain specific clothing and toys were not depicted in paintings before the 16th century. However, according to Ariès, the status of the child, became increasingly differentiated from adulthood, reaching its peak in the 19th century, when the “child-centred family” emerged. (Ariès cited in Montgomery 2009: 51)

Ariès identifies two types of ‘childhoods’ which emerged in the 16th century. The first, relates to children’s role as a source of amusement for the adults in the family. Through historical documents Ariès reconstructs how small children’s irrational and clumsy speech and actions became a source of divertissement, as Montaigne notes: *“... as if poor children had been made only to amuse the adults, like little dogs or little monkeys.”* (Ariès 1996: 128)

The second type of childhood identified by Ariès was closer to what Montaigne conceptualized: children were seen as *“fragile creatures of God who needed to be both safeguarded and reformed,”* (ibid.) disciplined and taught rational manners. This childhood ideal became very central in the European family life of the following centuries, and was added to by the increasing notions of hygiene and health.

Since Ariès bases his analyse about the pre-16th century childhood mostly on paintings, he has earned many critics nonetheless he is still the starting point for many child-centred researches and he remains a frequently cited author - especially concerning his

findings that childhood is socially constructed and is variable according to the cultural setting.

Often, the term childhood has been reduced to few characteristics that, as much recent research has pointed out, are not necessarily connected with children. Therefore Jean LaFontaine, in describing methods for child-centred research, argues that “*childhood, like adulthood, is always a matter of social definition rather than physical maturity*” (LaFontaine cited in Montgomery 2009: 44). A common argument of the scholars cited in this chapter is that children should not be seen as ‘unfinished’ and ‘weak’ versions of adults, or as ‘human becomings’ instead of ‘human beings’ (Alldred 1999: 4) but as “*worthy subjects in their own right.*” (Montgomery 2009: 44)

This approach, which rejects childhood as an epiphenomenon to adulthood, has emerged over the last two decades and demands that the social sciences use the children themselves as a starting point, and recognise that children possess agency and that they can and do “*influence their own lives, the lives of their peers, and that of the wider community around them.*” Their role as children should be seen as important, even if is only provisory and impermanent. (Montgomery 2009: 45)

This theoretical position has earned criticism for its political nature. Robert LeVine, an anthropologist that opposes this approach, comments that the anthropology of childhood should not only be about children as active agents. He argues that studies of socialization, while perhaps not focussed on the children’s agency, do not necessarily suppress the children’s voices and do not only take the adult’s perspective into consideration. According to LeVine, “child-centred research” is misused as a weapon, utilised to fight injustice rather than create knowledge. He argues, that (socialization) research, should resist politicization in order to gain deeper understanding. (Montgomery 2009: 46)

According to my findings, the idea of the “children’s voice” is itself also constructed by an adult-centric discourse that we, as adult who speak about children, cannot avoid. I perceive it as important to be reflexive about this in a first point, and be aware, that everything we write, say and assume about children, will retain an etic point of view. But as I discuss in the end of the Methodology chapter, the researcher can consciously try to approximate the “children’s voice”.

2.1.2 The commercialisation of childhood and children's deprivation

During the 10th century, childhood and children has become central to another sector: the economy. Childhood became a very marketable term, leading to the production of a whole range of commercial items in order to fulfil children's "needs". Simultaneously, childhood became "professionalised", as different areas of expertise related to childhood emerged in the health and the education sector. These "children's needs" became necessary in order to maintain what the Dutch anthropologist Olga Nieuwenhuys calls a certain "bourgeois order" (2006: 171-172).

As these two aspects, specific "needs" of children were defined, building a sort of "protection bubble" around the child's vulnerability and innocence. These "needs" became directly connected with the emerging market around childhood. (Seabrook cited in Nieuwenhuys 2006: 172)

Parents are thus required to provide the child with different items, such as toys or special tools, and also appropriate and specific nutrition and health care, to fulfil the child's (newly-defined) needs. The child will suffer a "lack" if the parents cannot fulfil these needs, harming the integral development of the child. However, this lack is only present if these "needs" are acknowledged; that is: if these needs are really present in a given society or if they are imported. (Nieuwenhuys 2006: 169-171)

Nieuwenhuys argues that this constructed children's space is not compatible with societies and cultures in developing countries, if the parents living in these countries do not have enough economic power to afford to fulfil these assigned children's needs. If a "correct" or "good" childhood is defined through the specific needs, it becomes impossible for the developing countries' children to live an "acceptable/good" childhood. They are condemned to "*live outside of childhood*", to "*lose their childhood*" or even worse, to "*to be robbed of their childhood*"¹. (Nieuwenhuys 2006: 172).

Child workers, like Gerald, the current leader of the Working Children's Organization in Cochabamba, thinks that they can live their childhood and simultaneously do 'serious' work:

¹ "*vivre en dehors de l'enfance*", "*perdre leur enfance*", "*être dépouillés de leur enfance*" (Translated by the author).

“ [...] I think it’s a lie when they say that the children, they lose their... their childhood because they work. [...] A child who works, he rather becomes more responsible... Because in the moment of laughing, we laugh. In the moment of speaking, we speak. In the moment of being serious, we are serious. It’s not only always laughing laughing laughing.”²

According to the occidental discourse about childhood, if it becomes apparent that children themselves try to find a solution to their lack of resources (often to fulfil the children’s needs promulgated by the West), they are automatically relegated out of the boundaries of the “sanctified” childhood and are seen as stepping into the adult’s world - where they are not supposed to belong.

2.2 Child labour and the working children

2.2.1 Child labour and Western society

Current literature on child labour proposes many different approaches, from within different discourses on how to approach this global issue: economic sanctions, eradication, schooling, State and civil society, cultural practices, universal values as well as children’s right to make their voices listened to. (Nieuwenhuys 2006: 165)

The metaphor of “voice” or “voices” is put between quotation marks in order to retain a certain reflexivity upon the common use of the word voice. Often “voices of...” is used to frame the opinion of a marginalized, forgotten or neglected social group and the action of “giving voice” is expected to provide empowerment to the group. I will come back to this detail in section 3.3.

In addition to all the “voices” of the scholars and the “voices” of the children and actors primarily concerned, I believe it is important to be aware of the Western society’s attitude regarding child labour - and this was a part of my field research as well. Of course, before digging into this matter, my own thoughts were embedded in the discourse of child labour dominant in Western society. Conducting research in this field widened my point of view. In my conversations with the main concerned parties – the working children - I started to see how this discourse owns a power to enable things to change or not to change. The more I learned about the actors and the arenas of my field, the more I

² Interview with Gerald 05.07.2014

was struck by the strong divergence between this common child labour discourse and the reality I experienced.

Every time I mentioned the topic of my research to Westerners in my home country or in Europe – but also in Bolivia’s neighbouring Chile - I was met with reflexions and thoughts nourished by stereotypes:

“This is something that is forbidden by law.”

“This is the saddest thing in the world.”

“These poor children need to be saved/rescued.”

“Tell me which NGO I can trust and send my money to in order to help them!”

These representative responses by my counterparts sum up in a simple manner what people from the West think about children who work: legality and legislature (section 2.2.4), morality and sensitivity and the role of the Westerner who can save it with financial means. These are different discourses which nourish the child labour discourse and also pretend to acknowledge the issue of these children by reducing the situation of millions of different children – in labour for many different reasons, just as it is the case in the world of adult labour - to a simplistic dichotomy of good and evil.

Manfred Liebel sees these as normative discourses that are institutionalized and that put an “ideological stamp” on the social phenomena that are working children:

“[...] In this way, reality is not simply measured and judged, but the perception and representation of that which counts as ‘reality’ is already marked by it.” (Liebel 2004: 52)

Through visual promotion of NGOs or campaigns such as the World Day Against Child Labour³, which are devoted to collect money to support child workers or similar cases, this simplistic image is spread, adorned with a sad and stigmatising soundtrack.

The image of the child in need, enslaved and to some extent abandoned by adulthood also applies to the children who work and try to show pride in their work. Their activity is relegated to the ‘informal’ and ‘criminal’ because they have no legal protection. Furthermore, their status as working children is often confused with the category of ‘street

³ <http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/Campaignandadvocacy/wdacl> (consulted 15.05.2015)

children' with very few resources; with the effect that their work earns less recognition than it deserves.

2.2.2 The concept 'child labour'

Child labour is a term with many connotations. In comparison with other terms like 'child work' and 'working children', 'child labour' is the harshest term used to define children who work – when not 'slavery' or 'exploitation'. Child labour therefore denotes the harshest forms of work executed by children. However, 'labour' or 'work' can also describe any lucrative or even non-lucrative activity.

In the context of my fieldwork, I have chosen to use the term 'working children' and 'child workers', since this is my translation of how the children I was investigating on and with call themselves: "*niños trabajadores*".

A strong paradox identified by Nieuwenhuys (1996: 240) is the shift in the perception of working children between the colonial times to the post-war period. Early anthropologists working in the global south under colonial regimes, used to identify children's work as an *antidote* to poverty. Not long after children's work came to be perceived as an *indicator* of poverty, and child labour became something that needs to be eradicated, following occidental concepts.

Since the 1980's the International Labour Organization (ILO) has tried to fix a differentiation between 'child labour', which would be more connoted with exploitation and slavery, and 'child work', a milder form where the child only works in small odd jobs in order to earn pocket money, which is not considered necessary for his survival (Liebel 2013: 170).

Scholars have used many different terms over time and no strict definition has been made, since the issue is too complex to be categorised by simple distinctions. Basically, many academic texts speak about child labour while describing exactly the typology of the children who work.

Depending on the culture in which children grow up, they will have to help or slowly take over the work of their parents, or they will have responsibilities in the household. In the Bolivian case, it is common that girls take care of their younger siblings, cook and take over many household tasks. Most of them would not define this as 'work' but as something that is taken for granted. Similarly, in rural regions, children naturally take

over responsibilities for animals such as sheep or goats. International Organizations such as the ILO are not very clear either on how they would define such 'housework', which can, in some cases, border on exploitation.

Manfred Liebel who has investigated the working children's unions in Latin America for many years, noticed that many important international organizations such as the ILO and UNICEF share a point of view that he would define as "gradual abolitionism" ("*abgestufter Abolitionismus*"). They differentiate between harmless work and the "worst" forms of child labour. However, only little attention is offered to the types of work in the first category. The "worst" forms of child labour earn most attention, and are also regulated and formally forbidden for minors by the convention n°182 and n°138 of the ILO⁴. Child slavery, forced labour, child trafficking, the use of children in armed conflicts, prostitution, pornography and other illegal activities or activities that endanger the child's health, security and moral, are included in the category of "worst" forms of child labour. The abolition of these work types is the primary goal and, according to the ILO, the first step towards eradication of any type of child labour. (Liebel 2013: 187)

Since the ILO does not take the harmless work much into consideration, Liebel argues

*"Wen an der Arbeit von Kindern nur interessiert, was "schlimm" oder "besonders schlimm" ist, wird dazu neigen, möglichst viele Arten von Kinderarbeit als schlimm oder besonders schlimm zu bezeichnen."*⁵ (Liebel 2013: 188)

He explains that at the time when this convention was discussed, many delegations wanted to keep the criteria for "worst labour" as wide and open as possible. The well-meaning but misleading idea behind this was to help as many children as possible.

The children of the working union UNATsBO make a clear distinction between three different types of work: independent and self-employed work (mostly in the informal sector), employed and salaried work and all forms of exploitation. These were the basis

⁴ The convention N° 138 of the International Labour Organization was ratified by most countries in the past 20 years. This convention regulates the minimal legal age for employment to 15 years and 14 for exception countries. Bolivia ratified this convention in 1997 and the minimum age is specified to 14.

<http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/facts/ILOconventionsonchildlabour/lang-en/index.htm> (consulted 15.05.2015)

⁵ "*Those who are only interested in what is 'evil' or 'especially evil' (worst) in the child labour spectrum, will tend to define as many as possible child work types as 'evil'.*" (Translated by the author)

for them to create the legal proposal, which aims to regulate the two first forms and keep the last form as forbidden, and which will be explained more in detail in section 2.2.4.

2.2.3 Child workers and exploitation

“We don’t want child labour to be eradicated, we want exploitation to be eradicated!”

This sentence was and is still used a lot by NATs (working children) representative when they discuss the new legislation about child labour. It is also partly because of such phrases that the new law bill authorizing and legalising children under the age of 14 to execute labour activities, which I discuss in the next section, was developed and accepted.

Thanks to the educators of the institutions and organizations working with the child workers, the NATs were able to understand easily what exploitation means and how to differentiate it from “dignified work”⁶.

In theory, the distinction between exploitation and work is very fluid. For instance a child who helps out his parents at home with the cattle or with the plantations can possibly be defined as ‘exploited’ when examined in detail, however in a general sense, it would be only seen as ‘helping’. While a child who is employed and earns a wage would directly be defined as an exploited child, just because he is not occupying a position in the family or within his educational or recreational surrounding, but a position usually reserved to adults. It is not possible to define which child will suffer more or conversely: which child profits more from this work activity?

The term ‘exploitation’ has been linked to many possibly misleading paradigms. According to Liebel, the exploitation discourse carries a very moralistic tone and is totally depoliticized. Exploitation is nowadays seen as an issue almost only related to children and as an indicator for a specific deficit within the given social group:

“[Ausbeutung] gilt nur noch als Indiz für ein Entwicklungsdefizit in der Sensibilität von Erwachsenen gegenüber einer als hilflos und schutzbedürftig vorgestellten Altersgruppe.”⁷ (Liebel 2013: 175)

⁶ “*trabajo digno*” is a term often used in the NATs discourse, which means a dignified, worthy work activity, that has a legitimate reason to be.

Liebel notes that it is commonly believed that it is in the nature of “being a child” to be vulnerable and that only protection, care and exclusion from the world of work can solve the issue of exploitation. We should understand exploitation as an unequal social relationship within a specific social context, in which one side uses power in order to take financial advantage of the other side, rather than automatically classify children who work for adults as exploited. (Liebel 2013: 175)

Child labour is also a term that is seen very arbitrarily. As Olga Nieuwenhuys puts it, child labour is linked to “*work in the factory and excludes a wide range of nonfactory work.*” (Nieuwenhuys 1996: 239)

Michel Bonnet states as well in the introduction of his collaborative and multidisciplinary book ‘*Enfants travailleurs – Repenser l’enfance*’ (Working children - rethinking childhood) that in many studies about children and work, it is shown that millions of children work at home or with their parents in an invisible way. And the conditions of this ‘work at home’ would be so poor, that if they would have to leave the home to be employed outside of the family, they would experience it as a liberation:

*“[...] s’il leur [les enfants] arrive de quitter le foyer pour s’employer à l’usine, sous des forms de travail que le BIT [OIT] trouve pourtant “extremes”, ils vivent ce changement comme une liberation.”*⁸ (Bonnet 2006: 26)

From this we understand that it is very difficult to identify the type of work conditions that should be (to use the NATs’ and the ILO’s term) *eradicated*. In general, ‘work’ would only name the activities that are directly rewarded with money, all other types of activities would be defined as marginal and not central to a community or society. As Bonnet notes, citing Ivernizzi:

“Toute activité peu rentable est dévalorisée et trop rapidement classée comme “activité marginale”. Pourtant elle s’explique souvent par son caractère formateur et/ou parce qu’elle répond aux besoins de l’enfant (jeu, relations, apprentissage, etc.). Inversement, toute activité qui est rentable sur le plan économique est, de ce fait, aut-

⁷ “[Exploitation] counts nowadays only as an indicator for a development deficit in the sensitivity of adults, towards an age group which is imagined as helpless and in need of protection.” (Translated by the author)

⁸ “[...] if it happens to them [the children] to leave the home to go working at the factory, under working conditions that would be seen as “extreme” by the ILO, they would still experience this change as a liberation.” (Translated by the author)

matiquement vue comme étant une forme d'exploitation parce qu'elle ôte à l'enfant du temps pour sa formation. Il s'agit là d'un cercle vicieux qu'il serait important de déconstruire."⁹ (Cited in Bonnet 2006: 26)

2.2.4 Child workers and the legislation

The legislation of child work, or better, the legislation that intends to fight child labour, is often – as with the example of Bolivia – based on the international discourse on child labour, which in turn, is based on the discourse promoted by the ILO. As seen in the previous sections, the discourse, or rather, the image the ILO and other international instances give of child work, is an arbitrary one in terms of what should be tolerated and thus of what constitutes 'exploitation' and what does not.

As Nieuwenhuys (1996: 239-40) argues, the 'common' understanding of working children makes a simple distinction between harmful and suitable work and refers to the legislation as a reference point.

Legislation, as dependent on the state or country, utilises age as the universal measure of biological and psychological maturity. Usually the legislation accepts some types of children's work, namely work for "*helping*" the parents (as seen in the previous section) or "odd-jobs" for pocket money. However, it decisively condemns any work undertaken by a child for his/her own upkeep. Nieuwenhuys (1996: 240) sees here legislation's denial of gainful employment for children. When we look at the goal of avoiding children's exploitation as the starting point of any legislation dealing with child labour, a paradox is apparent in the legislative discourse: working children who earn money are portrayed as those most likely to be exploited while children's work that does not involve any gain, should be tolerated and accepted.

Such positions, as Nieuwenhuys (1996: 242) notes, often negate these "*precious mechanism for survival*" such as children's work and are "*penalizing or even criminalizing the way the poor bring up their children*".

⁹ "*Every low or non-lucrative activity is rapidly devalued and classified as a marginal activity. But this activity might have a reason to be for its formative character and/or because it fulfils some of the child's needs (play, relations, apprenticeship). But then, every other activity, which is economically valuable, is automatically classified as an exploitation form. Invernizzi calls this a vicious circle which would be important to deconstruct.*"

The moral discourse around child labour is challenged when work executed by children enters the legal discourse, and especially in a positive way, as happened in Bolivia during my fieldwork.

During my fieldwork, I accompanied several times representative children of the ONATsCO in Cochabamba to national meetings of the UNATsBO in La Paz. I also accompanied them to one specific meeting with the senators at the Bolivian parliament (See section 4.5). After many years of discussions between the UNATsBO and the government (which included protest marches, meetings, and publication of pleadings), the senate decided to make a move towards accepting the children's organization's demands at this event. A new children's bill had to be developed, and the chapter concerning employment of minors would include new articles. Until this precise moment (July 2014), the Bolivian law prohibited employment in any forms for children and adolescents under 14. The new bill took into account the demand of the working children to make a clear differentiation between employed and self-employed work executed by children and adolescents. The new children's act, which was promulgated the 17th of July 2014 by the vice-president Alvaro Garcia, retains the previous fundamental position concerning child labour: work for under 14 year olds remains prohibited, but there are exceptions. These exceptions concern self-employed children from 10 years old on and employed (salaried) children from 12 years old on.

I. Se fija como edad mínima para trabajar, los catorce (14) años de edad.

II. Excepcionalmente, las Defensorías de la Niñez y Adolescencia, podrán autorizar la actividad laboral por cuenta propia realizada por niñas, niños o adolescentes de diez (10) a catorce (14) años, y la actividad laboral por cuenta ajena de adolescentes de doce (12) a catorce (14) años, siempre que ésta no menoscabe su derecho a la educación, no sea peligrosa, insalubre, atentatoria a su dignidad y desarrollo integral, o se encuentre expresamente prohibido por la Ley.”¹⁰

¹⁰ *I. The minimal age for work is fixed at 14 years old.*

II. Exceptionally, the Children's defence offices [sort of Ombudsman-Office] will permit the self-employed work executed by children between 10 and 14 years old and employed [salaried] work executed by children between 12 and 14 years old, with the condition that the work doesn't affect the child's right to education, is not dangerous, harmful, affecting his/her dignity and integral development, or is explicitly prohibited by law.” (Translated by the author) “

With these exceptions, the Bolivian state aims to remain within the ILO's convention 138's margin by not 'legalizing' the children's work under 14 but by 'permitting' it and 'tolerating' it. The argument of the Bolivian government for this radical change was to make a step towards the children's demands but especially to adapt to the Bolivian context.¹¹

The first reaction of the Western society – through the media – to these legal changes was indignation. However, as soon as it is made clear that the demand comes from child workers themselves – a detail not often mentioned by the media - the phenomenon meets more understanding, even though, the ILO, UNICEF and many international NGOs condemn this decision as wrong, and the Bolivian state as using wrong methods to fulfil children's needs¹².

2.3 Critical evaluation of child labour and subject-oriented research

Before I left to do my fieldwork, I became interested in Manfred Liebel's work on the topic of working children's rights in Latin America.

Liebel demands a different type of research on children in general and focuses specifically on the child workers. According to him, the perception of children's work in the whole world is marked by two contrary paradigms. On one side, there is the Western picture of childhood, which I mentioned in the precedent sections, and through which children are seen as 'legal subjects' but are not taken seriously (Liebel 2004: 50). From this point of view, child labour is automatically judged as harmful for children and needs to be eradicated no matter what.

On the other hand, a new type of research has evolved,

"[...] that does not automatically regard the relationship of childhood and work as negative, but as an open relationship that needs to be examined in a differentiated

Source legal text: [http://www.unicef.org/bolivia/Codigo_NNA - Ley 548 .pdf](http://www.unicef.org/bolivia/Codigo_NNA_-_Ley_548_.pdf) (consulted 15.05.2014)

¹¹ So Javier Zavaleta, Bolivian senator: "But we aren't making laws for developed countries, we're making laws for Bolivians." (source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-30117126> consulted 22.05.2015)

¹² i.e. : <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/neil-howard/on-bolivia's-new-child-labour-law> (consulted 16.05.2015)

manner, and above all taking into account the viewpoint of the working children themselves.” (Liebel 2004: 50)

The task of the subject-oriented and child-centred research would be to “*decipher the children’s “own will”, even when it is not always in language, or is concealed behind the child’s words.*” (ibid.)

With the perspective of the ‘critical evaluation of child labour’ we as researchers are asked to regard both sides of children’s work: the problematic forms it takes and the working conditions that can affect the child’s physical and psychological development, but also more positive aspects and the possibilities for the child to gain work experience. In their plea for child work, Liebel, Cussiánovich and Schibotto write:

“Es stellt sich die Frage, ob die Arbeit mehr sein kann, als nur das physische Überleben zu garantieren, oder ob sie auch eine positive Rolle bei der Identitätsbildung von Kindern, bei der Entwicklung ihres Selbstwertgefühls spielen kann.”¹³ (Cussiánovich, Liebel and Schibotto 2007: 5)

The critical evaluation of child labour positions itself against the typical understanding of children’s work, and its moralistic discourse. As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, child labour is often connoted with terms like ‘poor children’, ‘street children’, ‘criminal children’ or even ‘enslaved children’. According to Liebel et al, this discourse presents a negative image of child work – an image of lack and void - which is problematic and indirectly affects the children who it purports to protect, whose life, reality and childhood are stigmatised. How can he build his self-esteem and feelings of self-worth if he knows that his life world is pictured with all this negativity?

It is important also to take into account the social, economic and cultural contexts, which also influence much the child’s building of self-image.

The working children who call themselves NATs and are aware of the value of their work, turn this negativity into strength: The empowered children see themselves not anymore as children who lack something, but as children who have something more than the children who don’t work. They are proud to work and contribute to society in

¹³ *“The question arises whether work can be something more than only a guarantee for physical survival, or if work can also play a positive role in the children’s identity formation and feeling of self-worth.” (Translated by the author)*

their own way, and Cussiánovich et al (2007: 6) calls it a psychic liberation from the stigmatization they might suffer in an incomprehensive society.

In order to make their value and rights heard, the working children started to unite and created the first working children's unions and movements approximately fifteen years ago. Soon, some NGOs and humanitarian organization became interested in those movements and started to support them financially and structurally. Nowadays they work actively to make children aware of the value of their work and help them to find the necessary self-esteem in order to grow out of their social status.

According to Beatrice Hungerland (2007: 12), the children's organizations contribute to a sharpening of children's perception of reality and give them experiences that are seen as not necessary in the Western concepts of childhood, but are in the children's own social context.

The organised children could be

"[...] indicators for a new kind of childhood, in which children are not in the first place objects of the benevolence of adults, but active social subjects exerting their own influence." (ibid.)

3 Methodology

3.1 Approaching children with a video camera

When I initially began filming in the field, the children were very curious about the camera. They really enjoyed acting strangely in front of the lens, or holding the camera and filming each other.

The two different main field sites, which will be described in more depth later, were the Feria America market and the Cemetery of Sacaba. These were the two working places that I chose to investigate the children's work in more detail.

At the Feria America, which was held every Saturday, The children rapidly became used to my presence with the camera, each day from early in the morning, and they did not pay much attention to me filming them.

Different camera crews had been present for short times in the past, so I assume they did not find my presence with the camera and my interest in their work something strange for that reason.

At the Cemetery of Sacaba it was slightly different. The children here were also interested in the camera, however, most had also probably never seen a camera, and seldom seen a white person in person, before thus the camera and myself represented something exotic and new to them.

The first time I went to the Cemetery, I was accompanying my main gatekeeper, the educators from the institution AVE – ‘Audiovisuales Educativos’, which I will present more thoroughly in a later chapter. The educators of AVE were visiting the working children in these different working places on a regular basis, mostly once every week.

Since I arrived there together with these educators, the children firstly identified me as one of them and started to call me “*profe*” (short for professor, teacher). The educators do not really know why, but the children at the Sacaba cemetery always called them “*profe*” while all the other children working in other places they also work with, call them by their first names.

I was very excited about doing research and filming in this picturesque cemetery. It had all the characteristics of a proper ‘field’ (Grønhaug in Barth 1978) where I would probably be able to identify some dynamics among the children.

It was much more difficult than expected. I tried to go quite often to the cemetery, usually two or three weekdays and on Sundays. It was hard to know when the children would enter working, because their working hours were constantly changing. Even when I tried to figure out by asking them, they would answer some days they would be always there, but they would rarely stick to the working periods they had specified. When I was there, I would look for the children who were present, and see if they would agree to my presence, and then I would unpack the camera and let things happen.

Some older boys were good musicians, so I wanted to record more of their music, which I thought could be a nice part of my film. They were very enthusiastic the first time I told them that I could record it and upload it on YouTube, and all the children wanted to appear in some ways before the camera.

After some weeks of regular visiting, I started to feel that some days, I disturbed them. Some of them would start walking away when I arrived. After having spent some time in the field, I understood that the oldest boys had had a conflict with the educators of the institution AVE and did not want to be part of this group anymore, but still needed to work in the cemetery. Since they identified me to be on the side of AVE, and thus as someone who would look for their “bad” behaviours and report them to AVE.

One day I went to the Sacaba cemetery with my tripod and the fly microphone. I was determined to conduct proper interviews with some kids. But because it was Monday, there were not many kids working at the cemetery. I entered through the main door and then I saw Kano, a 15 years old boy who is one of the oldest child workers at the Cemetery. He is also one of the most experienced because he owns a guitar and is much demanded by the cemetery's visitors because of his skilful singing, playing and praying.

He was with another kid I had met some days before. They saw me and walked away. I waved to them to greet them, but they didn't smile, barely said a very inaudible hi, looked down and seemed to want to escape. I tried to begin any sort of conversation but I felt that they didn't want to engage with me.

I didn't know what to do, if I should just act in the way I would naturally act if somebody walks away all the time – just let it be – or if I should force and push the contact – for anthropological and study reasons. It's hard to choose one's behaviour because in anthropology class we are taught to gather information and what kind of information is useful. We also get taught to act naturally and to develop the most horizontal possible relationship with our informants that should be based on mutual trust. But at the same time, to be able to work with these children I had to “attract” their interest in some way. And they were not only children, they were also teenagers who can change their mind many times a day.

So I decided to sit on one of the central benches and wait for something to happen. Soon, a younger child showed up. It was Ruben, Kano's little brother. He was intrigued by the tripod and wanted to see it, to touch it and finally he managed to open it and to set it up. He started to play the sampoña, a sort of panpipe made of plastic, and sang the songs he usually sings to his client's deceased while I was filming. “I dedicate this song to all the working children in Bolivia!”, he exclaimed in a surprisingly confident way, after finishing the song.

After a failed attempt at a formal interview with Ruben, we decided to watch the video part we'd just recorded in which he played panpipes and sang. His first reaction was to open his eyes widely in a surprised expression. Then he stared at the camera's screen for minutes without moving at all, listening to his own music. It was as if he was petrified. He was laughing a bit but not much. When we stopped the video and switched to another one, he started to scratch his eyes. I slowly began to understand that he was hiding his need to cry. I asked him if everything was okay and every time he took his hands down, looked at me with a totally normal playful expression and said yes and other random things. But he was

putting his hands to his eyes again and again. I asked him if he didn't like the video. He shook his head but I couldn't identify if it was a yes or a no. I asked if he didn't like his own singing and playing and he didn't answer at all and remained silent.

It was the first time Ruben had seen himself singing and playing sampoña, the type of pan flute children play in the cemetery, on video and I assume by his reaction what he saw on the small screen of my camera was upsetting him or making him unhappy for some reason.

The practice of video elicitation is a common one in the field of visual anthropology, and much information can be elicited from informants by showing them to themselves. At the same time it is a tool – such as the camera in general- and has to be used very consciously and carefully.

The educators of AVE – who sometimes use videography and photography with the children for pedagogic reasons – were positive about the idea that I would film the children a lot. They said: *“It will help them to see themselves better.”* By this statement, they meant the self-awareness of these children, which would be strengthened through a positive perception of self and increase their self-confidence.

The use of the camera can also provoke the opposite reaction, as shown by what I assume happened with Ruben in this example. Such filming can show an image of oneself that one is not used to see and it can have a disturbing or painful effect.

Another methodological aspect, which is important to mention, is the ethical one. Since I did research on children and using a video camera, the Norwegian Social Sciences Data Services (NSD) contacted for more detailed information about the project before I left to fieldwork. In modern Western society, it is common to ask permission to parents or legal tutor, before any project is proceed with children. By then, I did not know yet what kind of life situations I would meet, so I agreed to have an oral contract with parents or legal tutors, as soon as I would have found the main characters of my film and research.

When I arrived in the field, it happened only very seldom to meet randomly parents of children I was working with. Few of them – usually the representative children of the ONATsCO – had very supportive parents who were agreeing on the participation of their children in the projects related to the working children's organization. But most of the children were organizing their lives outside and independently of the family circle. After

observing and discussing this issue with the children, I assume that the children were not much controlled by their parents or family members they were living with.

Since most of the parents of the children of the Cemetery in Sacaba spoke Quechua and not or only very little Spanish, I had difficulties to explain the project to them. I asked the educators of AVE, who have some contact with parents, to tell them about my presence when they would visit them. I trusted them to do so, because they had been doing some music and media projects in the past, where such permission had to be asked.

This ethical aspect also includes a necessary acknowledgement “*of power differentials between adult researcher and child informant.*” (Montgomery 2009: 46)

In research, children are usually asked if they want to participate. But in some cases it is difficult for children to express refusal. Often, research on childhood in Western context takes places in schools or in specific groups, that makes it hard for an individual child to refuse participation, while parents, teachers and responsible adults are granted much power on the decision if the children take part or not. Similarly in non-Western contexts, the permission is often “*granted to work with the whole community and children are rarely singled out or asked their views on cooperation with the researcher.*” (Ibid.) With the perspective I gained with my research, I see this structure of decisions rather paradoxical. As described in the previous chapter, children should be first seen as persons in their own right with their own will, rather than – as mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis with Montaigne’s words – “*fragile creatures [...] who needed to be both safeguarded and reformed.*” (Ariès 1996: 128)

As portrayed in the present and following sections, I conducted my whole fieldwork holding this perspective. Since I was present with the camera, I offered the possibilities to the children to or not to participate, and I had to be very sensitive to any signs of non-interest or rejection. Consequently, having the participation of the children guaranteed for the whole project was impossible, but having it for one day or one hour, could be negotiated appropriately.

3.2 Filming

When I entered the fieldwork I had absolutely no idea of what the “story” of in my film would be. I knew about the children, the union, the issues and the organizations, but I could not imagine what it would “look” and how it would be pictured through my lens.

As soon as I started to meet different children in different working places, all the cinematographic possibilities that opened up overwhelmed me. I saw many stories and many children whose stories or way of telling their story would show a different aspect of the phenomenon of child workers and their agency.

I decided to start filming whoever was showing interest in being filmed and I came to know many different children. But every time I believed that I had found a kid or a group of kids that I would be able to follow throughout the fieldwork stay, I deemed it too “risky” for the final product to follow only this child or children group. It was difficult to plan things with the working children because most of them live in an unplanned and spontaneous way. If I agreed on a specific day to film or to meet up for another reason, and the children or adolescent in question were very eager to meet and film something, they would most likely not show up at the appointment because something would have come up. It happened that sometimes I did not manage to see some of the children for weeks.

My strategy was then to go to the different working places and spend as much time as possible there. My film material is from four different places but for various reasons I choose two of these as my main case studies for the thesis and the film – the Feria America market and the Cemetery of Sacaba.

I tried to be consistent in the time and days I would be in the same working place because I thought some children would have some kind of regular scheme regarding which days they would be working and which days not. The Feria America market was easy in this matter because the market was held every Saturday over the whole day.

Regarding the other places, it became more a matter of luck to encounter the same children on a regular basis. At the Cemetery of Sacaba, I frequently met Ruben, who is often described in this thesis, and his older brother Kano, who dropped out of school and therefore has much time for work. Both of whom were part of the group of children who worked there almost everyday. But surprisingly, the fact that I would meet them more often than the other children did not make contact with them easier. I was often afraid to tire them unnecessarily or to annoy them in some way. Whether or not they wanted to be filmed – or to speak with me at all – also depended on their current status, needs and feelings. Even if I would always tell them explicitly that I did not want to steal their working time, some days it would happen that I would spend the whole day playing and

filming with one child or one group while some other days they would stay only five minutes with me and then disappear.

I never figured out a perfect strategy to be able to see the same children on a regular basis. But I believe that my strategy was, especially for this population, the most adequate. Since I spent only three and half months in the field, I had to develop a trusting relationship with the informants in a relatively fast way, merely in order to be present with them.

Throughout fieldwork I was filming many child workers in different places, but also many adults. These included the educators of AVE, who I also interviewed individually, people working for the NGOs who finance these projects and former child workers and ex-UNATsBO members who became adults, students and professionals. I ended up with a lot of film material with too many different actors to incorporate into one single 30 minutes documentary.

Right from the start, I wanted to show the children's agency and the children's participation in the different events and UNATsBO. I wanted the "children's voice" to be heard and like mentioned above, to avoid the use of a discourse coming from the adults. This was an ideological perspective which I tried to present by letting the children express themselves freely about whatever and however they wanted.

After fieldwork, I had to order my film material and separate the different sub-fields I had filmed in. For the editing I had to take the painful decisions on who would become the main actors of my 30-minutes film.

During the fieldwork and all the time spent with the children, I started to feel emotionally involved, and therefore I became emotionally connected to my film material. This "cutting out", "including" and "excluding" parts of my whole fieldwork experience was one of the most difficult steps because I had to take conscious distance from the material and reflect on what parts of the film material would serve best in order to tell a coherent story and transmit the knowledge I had gained in an accurate way, without nourishing all the stereotypes and preconceived ideas about child labour that are already present in a Western audience's repertoire.

3.3 Applied Subject-Oriented Research

The point of view of the 'critical evaluation of child labour' and the more subject-oriented research, as described by Liebel, and as discussed in section 3.3, motivated me throughout the project. Throughout fieldwork stay I tried to keep my eyes – or my camera-eye - at the height of the children's eyes, and to listen to (and observe) them before I would listen to any other people. And to do this, not only by listening what the children have to say, but also trying to "*decipher the children's "own will", even when it is not always in language, or is concealed behind the child's words.*" (Liebel 2004: 50)

The question is not only what children are saying and have to say, but also how they are behaving, acting and how they present themselves.

These attempts to hold this research point of view worked well in the Cemetery of Sacaba. The educators from AVE were only present there in the weekend and I had only a minimum of interaction with the adults of the Cemetery, so I really could spend all the time possible around the children and try to avoid being conflated by them with other adults in front of whom they must behave in certain specific ways.

I believed that through interacting with the children as much as possible, I would start to uncover their 'will' through their behaviour and actions towards me. Especially with the help of the camera I wanted to try to grasp how the children present themselves and how they would like to present themselves.

"It is important how children, in the various stages of a study, can influence the categories or indicators on which it is based and the decisions to be made, and whether technique are applied that really make it possible for the children to behave and express themselves 'uninhibitedly' and 'independently', and put across their view of things." (Liebel 2004: 50-51)

It is also important not to idealize the children's discourse and focus too much on the metaphor of the "children's voice", as a discourse of empowerment. This metaphor is obviously not one coming from the children themselves, but an adaptation of other popular discourses about empowerment of socially silenced groups (i.e. women, black people, LGTB movements etc.) applied to the "voiceless" social group of children. The discourse comes consequently from the adult's language and we can call it a discourse un-

der the adult's hegemony. Consequently, this "children's voice" can only "become known through adult accounts." (Brannen and O'Brien cited in Allred 1998: 2)

As an adult researcher, my position was consequently challenged: I had to approach this children's world without imposing my etic set of language and discourse upon the emic children's life worlds. To do so, I tried to minimize any representation of power that I was automatically granted by my social situation and the children's perception of me ('adult', 'European', 'wealthy'), and let the children I was interacting with to have as much power as possible on my research and filming. This means that I tried to suggest what to do (i.e. having an interview or filming a specific happening) as little as possible to rather present some options to the children. They would rapidly become quite creative and suggest themselves what to film and how to conduct interviews.

One day at the Sacaba Cemetery, there were almost no children present and only few people visiting their deceased. But as usual, Ruben was there earning money. I was sitting on a bench waiting for something to happen, when Ruben came to me and asked me like many times before: "Are we going to film today?" It was a good day for Ruben and he seemed happy with my presence, but I knew from past experiences that this could change in a matter of minutes. I wanted to take a chance again and I was amazed of the result.

Ruben asked me: "There is this lady, she wants me to pray for her deceased. Now you will come with me and film the whole process." I was wondering about what the lady would say when she saw me walking behind the prayer boy she just hired, and with a video camera. But Ruben seemed not to care at all. As expected, the lady looked at me with questioning eyes and I could see that she didn't feel at her ease in the presence of a foreign girl with a video camera. I politely asked if she was OK with me to film Ruben and that he had asked me to film it. She was all right with it, even though I saw her watching the camera nervously on several occasions.

I followed them to three different tombs, all family members of the lady. Ruben had to bring the flowerpots to the fountain, clean them up and fill them with clean water. He didn't ask me but rather ordered me to carry some pots with him. And when he had to carry a ladder to reach some tombs, he also ordered me to help him. The customer lady was amused to see me obeying this little child.

She asked Ruben to perform a full "Our Father" prayer in front of the tomb of her own father. And so he did but just before starting the prayer, he would make quite explicit signals with his hand and thumb, specifically directed to me. He wanted to tell me to start filming, that at this precise moment there would be something interesting for my camera to happen. Ruben was performing a mimic, conscious or unconsciously, exactly as a film director would shout: "ACTION!"



Few seconds before Ruben starts the prayer ritual.

I believe that in this precise moment, Ruben had a very clear idea of what his job was, how it should be shown to a foreign public and how to show it in full dignity and pride.

At the end of the process, Ruben didn't get the payment he was expecting and complained to the lady. He was fully aware of me filming at this precise moment. He certainly wanted to show the inequality that just had happened, and was very articulate when expressing his discontentment, while his client was there, but also afterwards, when he walked away and knew that I was still behind him holding the camera. When I stopped filming Ruben asked me if I would show this precise happening to other people, because he thought that it was important, and he added: "You see, that's how these people are and how they treat us!"

Liebel also claims for the children's own will and self-interpretation should be presented during research, and should be considered independently of the normal, usually nega-

tive, interpretation of what the children are able to do and do (especially their work). According to him this is also a tool to which Social Research can contribute:

“... making it possible and easier for children, in a world that mainly responds to them with incomprehension or even hostility, to find self-confidence, to take a stand, to feel their worth, to have a better negotiating position.” (Liebel 2004: 51)

4 The Field

4.1 Introduction

The first time I heard about the Child Worker’s unions was when I opened a street magazine in Switzerland. There was a short article illustrated with very emblematic photographs of children working in the copper mines of Potosi. The article did not go into detail but mentioned the children’s will to change the law concerning their rights as workers. The idea of a typical labour union consisting of decisive children struck my mind until the moment had come to choose a topic for my Master thesis and film.

I never had been in Bolivia before, but I had been travelling and studying in different Latin American and Andean countries, so I had a reasonably good idea about what kind of social surroundings I would find myself in.

After some research through organizations and newspapers in the Internet, I established contact with a NGO that works with the child workers. I was able to arrange to work with them and shortly after I headed to Cochabamba, the fourth biggest City of Bolivia, in the centre of the country.

The UNATsBO – *Unión de niños, niñas y adolescentes trabajadores de Bolivia* – Working children and adolescent union of Bolivia – has a long and tumultuous history. In recent years, the term UNATsBO could be read in many international newspapers.

The UNATsBO - also commonly called the “national organization of working children” - started its existence through the meeting of different working children’s organization

coming from the different big cities in Bolivia. The wish of these organized children was to step away from all the organizations and institution that were already present to help them, but represented a point of view that was too “*asistencialista*”. The word of Latin origin “assitancialism” – that is often used in the children’s organization’s discourse - is a slightly pejorative definition of a position of organizations, institutions or even the state towards a disadvantaged minority. It is pejorative because it underlines the power of the higher instance above the “powerless” and “voiceless” minority – in this case the children. The emerging UNATsBO wanted to participate and decide themselves, what is good and what is bad for them, instead of having to go through these instances. They wanted to stand against discrimination and exploitation and for the valuation of their rights.

Gladis Sarmiento, a former child unionist who later became a national leader, says about the creation of the UNATsBO subgroup in Cochabamba, when she was 13:

“[...] we rather wanted that is would rise from ourselves, and we wanted to fight ourselves for our rights.”¹⁴

After the first groups emerged and organized themselves on their own, some institutions financed by international NGOs, who follow a more participative approach towards the children, approached the groups and offered their support with meeting places and offices. Over the years, a national network of children’s organizations was built, connecting working children from all over the country but also different adult professionals of the field, such as educators working with NGOs and institutions.

Today the national children’s organization is supported by the NGO Save the Children, which organizes various meetings and workshops during the year, where representatives of the local children’s organizations meet and discuss relevant topics concerning their rights and their voice in front of the parliament.

Another NGO which finances diverse projects in Bolivia enabled me the contact with the institution AVE - Audiovisuales Educativos, which helps child workers in Cochabamba to organize themselves as the ONATsCO (*Organización de Niños, Niñas, Adolescentes Trabajadores de Cochabamba* – Working children and adolescent’s organization of Cochabamba) and provide them with educational tools such as video and radio.

¹⁴ Interview with Gladis Sarmiento, 28.07.2014

For my fieldwork, I decided to focus on some children working in Cochabamba and who are connected to the ONATSCO and the institution AVE. Through them and through the help of AVE, I could follow them also when travelling to La Paz for some national meetings with the UNATsBO and with the authorities.

4.2 Audiovisuales Educativos (AVE) and ONATSCO

When I contacted the people working at AVE the first time, they understood that I would come to volunteer, as many small institutions in Cochabamba welcome volunteers from abroad, especially from Germany and Switzerland. But this idea was fine for me. I thought that this would be to some extent participative observation.

What I knew about the institution is that they were working with NATs and use cameras, sound recorder and other educational tools as methods to support children who work. But I did not know much more before arriving.

When I first entered the office on a very sunny late April morning and participated in their weekly meeting, I found out that the major part of the work of the three employees (one accountant, one volunteer and one director) consist of administrative tasks. It took me a while until I understood exactly what they were doing. Basically, they follow and support the kids of the ONATSCO union. The children attached to this working group come from different “*gremios*” (some kind of committees, but basically groups of kids working at the same place) around Cochabamba: some cemeteries, some market places and some street artist’s places. The organization AVE organize different activities and workshops for those children, help them to coordinate with the other NATs organizations over the country and especially follow closely some critical cases, that means if some of them have problems with their families or have troubles with other young people. Until some special cases, most of the children involved with the organization AVE are children who go to school beside of work.

These children are also children who are mostly working in the informal sector and self-employed. Concerning children working in other work sectors, the educators of AVE explained me that it is very difficult to identify if children work with their families because this is not commonly recognized as proper work. It is also very hard to approach children who are employed because they do not have enough free time and they would

rapidly get fired if their employers come to know that they are members of a union. But the informal sector, in which the self-employed children and the ones supported by AVE are classified, is one of the most represented in Bolivia.

Institution - Organization

This is the point where some questioning about the role of my work started, and where I started to doubt about how to process next. Through my first encounter with the topic of the discussion between the children's working union and the state, I started to understand a bit more about the struggle of some children who *have* to work and use working as a survival strategy. As far as I understood at this time, the children AVE is working with in Cochabamba, earn money mostly in order to buy things for their free time or for school tools and similar things they 'want' but do not necessarily 'need'. So my question became following: Is the defence of the NATs' rights by children who need to help their parents to pay the rent, to buy food, to survive the same struggle as the one of NATs children who want to work because they want to buy cell phones and other leisure time things? Is the form of struggle of children with basic needs the same as the struggle of children with secondary? How to separate their agendas? Are they really united in the same movement? Can they understand each other? Do they have the same convictions and the same understanding of the importance of the topic? I could never answer this question since my research time was too short to investigate properly in particular children's situations. However, with the time I could see the 'union' between these children, regardless the nature of their needs and the reasons why they work.

In the beginning of the fieldwork I became confused about the 'field'. I was asking myself if this place in Cochabamba, with the help of this specific organization, was the right place to dig for answers to my questions. I was thinking: *"I don't want to meet children who just repeat what institutions tell them to tell to journalists or to these international NGO delegations who come to visit the "poor" kids."* I wanted to go beyond the stereotypical work one can produce in these surroundings.

I was disturbed by the incongruence between what I was expecting before going to fieldwork – a specific type of life situation for those children - and what I was encountering. I had the feeling that the children who were "only" working in their free time and in the weekends – as myself used to do in Switzerland when I was young and as many other young people I know used to do in other European countries – would not have the

specific strength, will and awareness of responsibility that I had imagined before I went to fieldwork. When first reading about the UNATsBO, I had imagined that all these characteristics would be visible and that it would be easy to recognize the unionised working children's strong will to change their conditions and their strategies they use to invade the structures of constraints that are defined by adults. (Nieuwenhuys 1996: 247)

Before leaving to fieldwork, I had romanticized the idea of a children's labour union fighting for the child worker's rights. To some extent, I think I was ridiculously expecting to meet "small size" socialist politicians and children, who exactly know the adult's world and how to affront it. But this responsibility and *will* was there, just in a very subtle way, hidden behind these kids' natural childishness. It would take me the time of the whole three and half months of my fieldwork stay to identify it and to understand that the information I was looking for, was not necessarily in what the children were saying or not saying, but more how they would behave in certain situation and how they would react and engage discussion in different situation and towards different challenges.

The prejudicial ideas and thoughts I had in the very beginning of the fieldwork made me want to question the Eurocentric perceptions and ideals of childhood, and to describe the need of child labour as a way to deal with survival in a given society. I wanted to analyse how children become conscious and responsible individuals before this is meant to happen according to the occidental understanding of childhood.

I started to feel strange about the NGO institutions and their financiers. When topics of finances and money were raised at the institution's meetings, it reminded me the Christmas markets in Switzerland, where objects from Bolivia and other developing countries are sold in order to raise funds for these NGOs. I was comparing this "NGO business" to the children's business when at work. Through these thoughts I started to realize that most children do not have exactly the same understanding of what 'work' means, as adults.

Woodhead (cited in Liebel 2004: 71-74) explored children's perspective on their work, and made clear that children are truly 'insiders' to their job, while any adults can only be 'outsiders' - even if the adults have years of experience with children's work and are reputed as experts of this matter.

In order to get to know the children, I had to go through the institution AVE, which calls itself “institution” in contrary to the organization ONATsCO. The ONATsCO (organización de niños y adolescentes trabajadores de Cochabamba – Organization of working children and adolescents of Cochabamba) and its members are uniquely children. But in order the children to function really like an organization, the adults working at AVE have to gather the different representatives of the ONATsCO in their office at specific dates and plan specific activities and food in order to have the children to join.

During my fieldwork stay, I increasingly had the feeling that the organizations are more an abstract thing above the concrete institutions. Interestingly, when the media speaks about the children’s working union, they always only name the name of the organization (national UNATsBO, local ONATsCO or other ones) but the name of the institutions or the NGOs, which are the financiers, are never mentioned.

4.3 Feria America - The market

The Feria America Market is held every Saturday morning from early morning until approximately 15.00. It is situated in the richer part of the centre of Cochabamba and is known to be one of the highest quality markets in town. The prices are also considerably higher than in other markets and the clientele comes from the highest layers of society.

The children who work at this market place call themselves “*carretilleros*”, what would be translated as wheelbarrow pushers. Their job consists of following the customer through the market with a wheelbarrow and charge the bought goods in it. When asked what their job consists of, most of children would answer “*We are helping.*”

Early morning wheelbarrows

At the Feria America there is an agreement with working children, AVE and the director of the market upon the work of children in the market. Some children own their own wheelbarrow but most of them do not and they rent out a wheelbarrow for the day from a lady, Doña Vicki, who lives in the neighbourhood and earns money by renting out wheelbarrows to the working children. The children who own their own wheelbarrow

also can store it in her backyard during the days they are not working. They also have to pay a small fee to her in order to do so.

An issue that came up while I was in the field, was the fight for the best wheelbarrows when the children arrive in the morning. Doña Vicki has different types of wheelbarrows, some newer and some older.

Like Neysa, one of the representatives of the Feria America explains:

“At 6 o'clock we can register. They write down who has arrived. Most of us don't have our own wheelbarrow. It's important to arrive and register early. Because sometimes there are no wheelbarrows left. Then we can't work. [...] The ones with rubber wheels are lighter. For carrying stuff. It's lighter and it costs more. It costs 5 [Bolivianos]. The wheels on the other type are solid. It's not made of rubber. These are cheaper and heavier.”¹⁵

It is not only the functionality of the wheelbarrow that is important for the children but they also take under consideration the look of it. The children explained me that they want to avoid having a very rusty wheelbarrow because the customer would always choose the wheelbarrow pusher with a nicer wheelbarrow, since the groceries are put in there and they do not want it to touch the rust.

All the children who come to work at the Feria America market know well which wheelbarrows are the good ones. Therefore, at the moment to register with Doña Vicki, they would always choose which wheelbarrow number. And the rule was “first come, first serve”, so the children started to come as early as possible in order to register for the wheelbarrow of their choice. It became usual, that some children would appear at the Feria America square around two o'clock in the morning and play football or just wait until they could register with Doña Vicki. The Feria America square is in the centre of the more “upper class” sector of the cities, where many restaurants, bars and clubs are, and is a common place where people meet up and drink before going to the clubs. Since the Feria America market is held every Saturday, children coming very early to the square happen to be exposed to adults drinking there, which represent some risks for the children. As an example, the AVE educators told me that some of the Feria America children found some leftover alcohol in the square and one of them drank it and became severely intoxicated.

¹⁵ See my Masterfilm “Trabajar es crecer” at 20:39:00

In order to regulate these risk situations, the educators of AVE started to discuss the issue with the head of the market place and with Doña Vicki. A new system of distribution of the better wheelbarrows was developed with a sort of lottery, but not all the children were totally happy with this new decision.

Neysa and Leti, two Feria America representatives explained me different rules they had to respect among wheelbarrow pushers:

Neysa: "The most important [rule] is to use the credential. And not to steal, we should not steal. We should not fight."

Leti: "And not bringing alcoholic beverages and not provoking, especially if there are fights. [...]"

Neysa: "Also, in order to be allowed use the "Rotaram"¹⁶ wheelbarrows, you have to have been working here for at least one year. And respect the regular customers. And cash in payments of at least 5 Bolivianos, no lower."

[...]

Neysa: "If there is a new kid, he has to share the wheelbarrow with the kid who brought him. But if by luck there is a remaining wheelbarrow, he can use it. But only an old one. And then he has to make himself known by the others and then ask for a credential, because he has to show that he is a child worker."

Me: "Would you have any advice for a new working kid?"

Neysa: "That he should not come! (laughter) No I am joking. But when there are more kids working here, it produces more competition. And then we earn less."¹⁷

These fixed rules were possibly partly initialized by the educators, who help them to organize. But that the rules are memorized as such and remain more or less respected, shows that the children see them as relevant for their worker's lives.

I usually arrived at Feria America at 6 in the morning, before dawn. At this time, most of the children who rent wheelbarrows were usually already there, sitting on a little wall that is bordering the channel of an almost dried out river in the centre of the loan next to the square. It was always a very special atmosphere. Even if the sun can shine very strongly in Cochabamba during the day, mornings are always very cold. Most of the children sitting there usually had arrived some time before me, some by car with parents or relatives who work in the market, some others by foot. And all of them live outside of

¹⁶ Refers to the brand of the "best" wheelbarrows

¹⁷ Interview with Neysa and Leti 21.06.2014

this neighbourhood, which means they would walk for at least two hours. One educator from AVE, usually Carolina, would be there and also Max, an employee of another organization called “*Encuentro Temprano*” (Early mornings encounters) that provides children or unprivileged groups with help. In this case, Max and Carolina teamed up every Saturday morning to bring activities and support to the Feria America wheelbarrow pushers before they would start working. Together they would also bring a bucket of hot beverage and some little food for breakfast. During the moment the children would sit on the little wall and be eagerly eating their breakfast, Max and especially Carolina would make the children aware of different issues concerning their work or the working place and would also try to keep the relation of the working children with the wheelbarrow lady Doña Vicki and with the director of the market Doña Cristina, as smooth as possible.

I identified the children’s group of the Feria America as the most organized one I had visited, but also the most controlled. The adults around the market also took all these important rules into account. In order to be accepted in the marketplace and not thrown out by the security guards, the children need to carry their credential with name and picture around their neck. The educators of AVE are in charge to organize these credentials (take a pass picture, print it, plasticize it). The putting in place of this project is still in process and is supposed to be brought to all other children’s working places in Cochabamba.

For all these rules and control regulation around the work of the children, I suggest that this group is more “institutionalized” than other children’s groups.

4.4 *Cementerio de Sacaba* – The graveyard

Sacaba is a neighbour town to Cochabamba. I would use a bit more than half an hour with the half-public transportation to get there, but only 10 minutes with a regular taxi. At one end of the town, between some dry waste land, there is the General Cemetery of Sacaba. The first time I went there, accompanying Carolina, the educator of AVE, we did not enter the cemetery. Across the road in front of the entrance of the graveyard, are two flower stands, some car parking spaces and one snack bar. There would also always be some ice cream salesladies on sunny days. There are two benches next to second

flower stand, and on these benches, at my first day there, were approximately 15 children sitting, standing and playing around. This bench spot was where all the children who work in the cemetery would meet and hang out while there is no work.

By speaking about the children's work in cemeteries with various Bolivians I met, I learned about a common belief, that children are closer to heaven and to the deceased because their presence on earth has not been as long as the adult's, so they are felt as innocent and closer to God. It is a quite common practice to have children to pray and sing for the death in cemeteries in whole Latin America.

The younger children at the cemetery bring and change water for the flowers and polish the graves. When they gain a bit more experience, they start to recite prayers and to sing for the death. The older ones have a bigger repertoire of songs and use instruments such as guitars and sampoñas, a type of plastic pan flute. There are also children staying outside of the cemetery and watch the cars of the cemetery visitors.

Similar to the Feria America, there are also rules among the children of the cemetery of Sacaba. But I could experience several times how some children were making their own exception to these rules.

Alexander, one of the representatives of the Cemetery of Sacaba explains:

"Every kid who starts working here has to bring water for the customer's flower-pots at the graves during 3 weeks, before he can do anything else. [...]"

After these three weeks usually he gets his working vest¹⁸ and then he can choose which job he wants to do. They choose if they want to be car cleaner or prayer boy/girl.

[...]

Other rules are [...] Fights are forbidden. And then you are not allowed to take other people's belongings. And everyone has to respect these rules and if not, you get sanctioned. [...] And when one is sanctioned, he can't come to the cemetery for a certain time, like two weeks or one month. It depends of the non-compliance he has done. "¹⁹

¹⁸ The organization AVE organizes small-sized blue vests for the trustworthy children. In the back of the vest one can read UNATSB0 in white letters and ONATSCO in even bigger white letters. On the chest there is either the logo of the NGO Save the Children or the one of Terre des Hommes.

¹⁹ Interview with Alexander 22.06.14

There are also things the children need to respect in order to do a good job: The prayer have to be known perfectly by heart and recited in the correct order, with the correct musical interludes (songs and sampoña playing).

Ruben

Ruben is the child I was meeting the most often at the cemetery, most likely because his family is in need of money and he partially dropped school. He is also looking up to his older brother Kano, who is one of the oldest children working in the cemetery, and the most demanded singer and prayer because of his musical skills. Ruben was also one of the children who were very eager to play around in front and behind the camera.

One day I showed Ruben random footage I had shot in the cemetery. We went through one clip where another boy, who is relatively new in the cemetery and also a bit younger than Ruben, exercises a prayer in front of an educator from AVE who was visiting.

By seeing this, Ruben started to criticize and make fun of the younger boy straight away. What he was criticizing were, in my 'outsider's eyes', very small details, such as wrong pronunciation of some words. For Ruben, these things were totally not acceptable. He said: "He won't be allowed to work here. He is way too bad. If he want to stay here, he has to keep on in bringing water."

For me, the group of children working at the Sacaba cemetery, was a much more bonded group in comparison with the children of the Feria America. It is a much smaller group and they all live in the same neighbourhood and go to the same school, what is not the case with the Feria America, where they meet only when they work.

This strength in the group is shown through how the children hold together and share many things among each other, or – like in the case portrayed above – defend their territory.

4.5 Meetings in La Paz with UNATsBO

Another arena I stepped in, where I could discover another perspective on the topic, were the national meetings of the UNATsBO in La Paz. Several times, messages reached the educators of AVE in Cochabamba, convoking the ONATsCO representatives to a national meeting. Usually, these messages arrived in a very last minute and many organizational steps had to be taken by AVE in order to make it possible for some NATs from Co-

chabamba to attend the meeting. Among other things, Liseth, the AVE educator in charge for accompanying the children to La Paz, had to ask written permissions from the considered children's parents or tutor, but also from their schools (in case school days would be missed). Then, it she would coordinate with the NGO financing these national meetings to have money sent over, in order to buy the bus tickets – which always represented a hassle for AVE. For all these reasons, it would often happen that some representative children, or even the whole Cochabamba group, would not be able to attend.

If a meeting would take place, and a delegation from Cochabamba would join, I was informed right away and joined them for the whole journey.

We used to take the night bus to La Paz, leaving late night Cochabamba and arriving before early morning in La Paz. Once, we even had to change over to an expensive taxi on half way, for reasons of the protests that often paralyze the national roads leading to La Paz. If the meeting would last more than one day, the financing NGO would invite the children to stay in a hotel – and this was always a great highlight for them, a thing that remembered me of school camps.

The meetings were always a great opportunity to get to know better the children who later would become the main actors of my research and of my film. I would spend the whole journey with them, from the journey in the night bus to every meal of the day. I was also assisting Liseth, the educator from AVE, by taking care of the children when it was needed. But I rapidly figured out that these children did not need special care or attention, since they were totally able to get along in new situations and surroundings.

Even the meeting were quite fundamental for the development of the UNATsBO and the plans they developed for the demands to the parliament, most of the younger children – between 10 and 13 – would rather use this time in any possible different ways instead of developing political plans.

For instance, Juan David would really enjoy to meet other NATs from other cities, and keep in touch with them via Facebook after the meetings, while Gerald, tired and a bit bored of having participated in so many meetings, would like to challenge the adult organizers by escaping incognito the workshops and meetings, in order to explore the hotel and the surroundings.

The program was often made in collaboration between the different adult companions of the children coming from the different cities. Most of them were financed by different European or North American NGOs. Sometimes, the whole group would be visited by other instances, such as people from the government or from the Ombudsman offices. Most of the time, workshops were held, using exercises and participative methods that were meant to increase the children's awareness of their own rights in general. In some parts, strategies to obtain the government's and the societies' attention were discussed.

I was interested in how proportional the participation was: were the adult educators the most active or were the children? I figured out that all the adults coming from different cities and different institutions and organizations were using very different strategies to work with child workers and they were also holding very different ideologies behind these strategies. Some would consciously try to give a minimum of input, in order to let the children express themselves how they want and when they want, and some other had a more - in their terms - "realistic approach", when children have to be led towards some expected results. I could picture this for instance when there were presentations held in the meeting room and some educators were asking children very strictly to be quiet and listen. In my opinion, some educators were more approaching a status of school teacher in children's eyes, while other were more seen as an 'adult friend' and helper.

Since I was going around in these meetings with a video camera, many children became interested in my presence and wanted to try out the camera. Through this, I could attract many children's attention and get to know them and their own organizations.

The first time I went to one of these meetings, I met some children from the children's organization based in the city of Oruro. I was struck by how differently they would answer my questions and engage into conversations with me in contrast to the Cochabamba children I was used to follow. This made me even re-think my decision of staying in Cochabamba for the whole fieldwork, or if I should move to the other cities as well, in order to discover what other children - who seemed to be, in my eyes at this precise moment, "less institutionalized" - would have to say to me and to my camera.

This was confusing but in the end I was happy that I stuck to my initial plan and stayed with the Cochabamba delegation. I figured out that the first encounter with any group of children - from whichever city, would always be very similar. The children would figure

out quite precisely what sort of information I was after, and they would know how to make themselves interesting towards me.

I assume that all these union children have experienced how interesting their issue and their situation had become for the media, researchers and for foreigners who investigate the topic. They already could feel the importance of it, and how they gained status. On top of that, if they could be filmed and experience the use of cameras and other equipment that they only knew from the TV, they would be even more eager to approach me.

The positive energy generated in these meetings was very intense but also exhausting, for the adults, the children and also for myself. I struggled to follow day in day out the flow of the discussions and the workshops, until I figured out that the children as well were very exhausted, and their attention dropped almost as fast as mine.

What I retain from these encounters is the happiness of these children to meet other NATs from all around and exchanging with them. The feeling of belonging to a group that is extended throughout the whole country provides the children with much strength and self-consciousness, status and importance.

The senate

Another time I accompanied some children representative of the ONATsCO to La Paz, was for discussing the new legal bill with the president of the senator's chamber at the government's palace. When the invitation reached AVE and the ONATsCO, it was as usual in a very last minute. I packed my equipment right away in order to join them because I had big expectations for such a meeting. On one side I wanted to film the children discussing the legal issues with senators, and I wanted to see what kind of dialogue could emerge from such a meeting. I knew that some of the children I was following, already had had an official meeting with the Bolivian president Evo Morales, so I expected them to be used to such situations.

As had happened before, we took the night bus to La Paz and arrived early morning. We had enough time to wake up, have breakfast and acclimate to the altitude and the cold of the Andean city before we met approximately 20 other UNATsBO representatives in a meeting room belonging to the children's organization of La Paz. There, everybody was very nervous. This was "the day" when everything would maybe change for Bolivia's

NATs, when the proposal the organization had worked on for so many years would finally be discussed and possibly accepted by the senate.

The educators who had accompanied the children from all over the country were informing concretely what would maybe happen in the parliament, and the children were asked to practice what they would say. It was a very tense atmosphere in which the more laid-back children seemed to be nervous.

After some speeches of former UNATsBO representatives, some exercises and some attempts of simulation of the discussion in the parliament, we crossed the city centre by foot to arrive to the parliament. I expected to get into trouble because I was following the children with my video camera, but surprisingly I was granted access without any problem.

We were lead in a big discussion's hall, where the children would be served some snacks and drinks and would have to wait almost one hour for the senators and the president of the senate to join. Many of them had to be asked to stay quiet and to remain in their seats.

I expected to experience some interesting exchange between the politicians and the children, but I was a bit disappointed. The president of the senate started to read the program and the different things that they would discuss: Principally a change in the legal text concerning the minimal age for work and the differentiation between types of work. Then followed relatively long and boring monologues in a tone and a language some could call stereotypical to people working at the government. I was often asking myself if the children would understand this official language, since myself I had to struggle with it.

Before we went to the government palace, some of the children of the UNATsBO had prepared what they possibly would have to say during the meeting, but the right moment to say what they would have to say never arrived.

After the different present senators had one's say, an ex-UNATsBO representative who now is 20 years old and cannot be a UNATsBO member anymore²⁰, could present his

²⁰ Usually when the UNATsBO members turn 18, they have to give up their role as member, representative, secretary or president. Most of the very active member remain very

well-prepared thoughts to the senators. But since he was a very experienced UNATsBO member who had been very active in the whole project around the demand for a new law in the past seven years, his language was very similar to the senator's.

After some hours of a more or less one directional discussion, the meeting was over and the children of the UNATsBO were invited to sign the acceptance of the modification in the law, what they did with great fervour. As explained in section 2.2.4, the modification in the law that the senators approved, was an adaptation of the proposal that the UNATsBO had made some years before. Even though the whole discussion was held in a very specific language that one do not expect to be well understood by children, I was surprised to hear quite accurate sum up of the result of this meeting from them. The children were cheering and celebrating, because in their eyes, a long process of a long struggle came to a successful end, even though all of them were too young to have been part of this process since the beginning.

More than a change in the law, it was an achievement for the UNATsBO and for all the NATs to have themselves and their work recognized by the state and by the authorities.

4.6 The media and the NATs

During my fieldwork stay, I had also the opportunity to follow some children representatives to different radio stations and one TV station. Sometimes, the children were deliberately invited by the media but most of the time the educators of AVE sent out notes to the respective media offices.

The children always enjoyed being interviewed in the media, even though they were nervous before getting in front of the stage. Some children, like Gerald, the 12 years old president of the ONATsCO at this time, became accustomed to speaking to the media. I recognized a specific language and intonation that he would use when answering questions concerning the UNATsBO and the rights of child workers.

The educators of AVE told me that Gerald had lost a bit of his motivation and interest to speak in front of the media. Approximately at the same time, Juan David, another 12

involved in the union by assisting the educators and helping out for different activities or events.

years old representative who also works at the Feria America like Gerald, started to join meetings in La Paz and other UNATsBO events. I could assist to his first ever interview at a local radio station in Cochabamba.

Before the journalist would start asking him question, Juan David seemed quite nervous and he was telling me that he did not know at all what he would say, and that he would forget everything when he would have to start speaking. Surprisingly, when the journalist started asking him questions, he seemed much more relaxed and very secure about what and how to express himself. He was describing and explaining in an eloquent way and showed signs of engagement and eager when the topic of the struggle of the UNATsBO and the child worker's rights came up.

During my whole stay, Juan David was asked to different interviews, along with Gerald at a TV station, in groups to other radio stations or alone with different international journalists. With time he became more self-confident and relaxed about being interviewed. When the end of my fieldwork stay approached, I asked him to give me an interview as well. Juan David accepted, but asked me to be short because he was already tired of having given many interviews, and that he always had to say the same. I told him that he could tell me whatever else he would like to say and what he had not had the opportunity to do with the journalists but he did not want. He just asked me: "*I don't want to speak free. Please ask me the questions.*" Juan David referred specifically to *the* questions, precisely because he expected the questions to be the same again. I tried to vary a little bit and ask different things that would attract his attention, but the content of the interview ended up not to be very different to what all the journalist had produced before.

When I read through different interviews with former NATs and watch archive videos, I can identify a NATs discourse. This discourse evolved throughout the years and in my point of view, became very representative of what the NATs identity is. Gerald and Juan David, as many other representatives before them, took over a discourse and to some extent an ideology that is partly brought to them by the educators of the institutions and the adult supporter of the UNATsBO. This is a point, which is often used as a target by the critics and opponents of the child worker's union.

It is obvious that the children cannot learn this language without the input of adults, since it is a language used in an adult sphere. Nonetheless, the children take over the parts of this discourse and ideology they understand and they can relate to, and this tak-

ing over is not a “blind repeating” but an own interpretation. According to my opinion, this interpretation of a discourse, which aims to defend the children’s rights, is a sign of empowerment.

5 In depth

5.1 Work and school

In the global discourse about child labour, school is seen as the opposite to children’s work, each impeding the other: Children will not attend school if they work, and schooled children should use their free time for homework and play. Obviously the practice is much more complex.

From the point of view of the working children, school stops to be what it pretends to be: an institution that secures equal access to education to everyone. According to Bonnet, school drops the children who cannot follow the educational plan straight away and children, who will experience their own struggle to access education, will also more easily be excluded from it once they reach it. The idea of school as a vocational instrument that is accessible to everyone remains an illusion. Seen from the point of view of the ones who cannot manage to have access to school, it is merely a structural impossibility than a temporary lack (of financial or political means i.e.). (Bonnet 2006: 27)

Most of the children I have met during my fieldwork are schooled in a regular basis. Children who go to public primary school in Bolivia will either go to school in the morning or in the afternoon. In some cases, older children and adolescents can also attend night classes if they have to work during the day. Therefore, there is time left to the children to work, even during the week.

Among the children I was working with, there were some exceptions. For instance some children were skipping school or were excluded from school for a certain period of time due to some reasons. Since my focus was on the children’s work and the children’s agency, I did not dig much into the school topic, but I still perceive it as relevant to be mentioned. Every time I presented my research project to different audiences – at a conference or just to people interested in such topics, the question if the children I was filming

were going to school, always came back. I knew that this would also happen with the film, if school would not be mentioned there either. I started to look through my material in order to find a part where children would mention school, but surprisingly I found only very little useful material. During my fieldwork time, children did only have once short holidays and were going to school every week. But they were still mentioning it very seldom. They would rather speak about what they did at home, with their football team or at work. To my point of view, it seemed that school was not very central to their lives, beside of the time spent there.

When school was spontaneously described, that means that they would start speaking about it without me asking for it, the tendency was to describe something boring and tiring. Many children I interviewed would also tell me that they have all their best friends at work and not necessarily at school. The children were also free to work when they wanted and if they would want to take a break or start a football game with their mates, they would be able to do it with no restriction, therefore they would rather hang out with their workmates instead of schoolmates during their free time.

When I asked more explicitly about school, all of them would give me a very similar answer, but at the contrary of what I describe above, they would value school, telling me that studying was the thing that they like the most. I could not always take this answer as an accurate one, since it also came from children that I knew to skip school relatively often. It was most likely an answer that children would think I was expecting.

One day at the Cemetery of Sacaba I tried to conduct an interview with Ruben, but it didn't work out at all the way I had expected. My questions were intended to uncover some of the child's reality and subjectivity, but I earned only answers that I felt to be "pre-made": answers he probably believed me to expect and to want to hear.

Me: "What do you prefer, to be at work or at school?"

Ruben looks around, thinks for a little while and answers fast, in the tone of having found the right answer

Ruben: "I prefer to be at school. Because school is more important than work."

Ruben has an unsecure gaze to me, as if he doubted if this was the "right answer".

[...]

Me: "Where do you prefer to be, at home, here at the cemetery working, or at school when you have to do tasks?"

Ruben: "At school, doing tasks and exams and things like this."

I was questioning the truthfulness of these answers, but Ruben seemed to want to stick to this answer and seemed not to understand why I would question it.

One of the few adult musicians who occasionally worked in the cemetery passed by at this precise moment, and told me to ask Ruben why he wasn't at school right now. From Ruben's shameful expression I figured out that he was supposed to be at school, but as the musician told me, Ruben hadn't washed his school uniform. I tried to ask carefully more about this, but Ruben was not willing to discuss the matter further.²¹

Bonnet demonstrates that researches have shown that the content of the normal school plan constantly devaluate the type of jobs that the children will most likely practice once they have finished school (i.e. jobs that do not require secondary or higher education). (Sarangapani cited in Bonnet 2006: 29)

When I was asking the children at Feria America or at the cemetery what they would like to work when they are grown up, I could identify a tendency. Younger and more un-reflected children had the tendency to answer "lawyer" or "medical doctor". To the question of what they would like to study after high school they had also the tendency to mention the careers that are known to be the most hard and long, such as engineer (even if the child did not know much about what this profession was about). Adolescents who had had a bit more experience with the UNATsBO and other organizations, reflected in a more realistic way on the question. Many teenager girls answered that their goal is to help other people or work "in something social", like becoming a schoolteacher or an educator (mentioning it at the example of AVE).

I do not want to argue that graduating as an engineer is not a reachable goal for these children. In my film, a fellow worker of the children working in the market is mentioned. The group mentions him, telling that he recently retired from his car wash job that he was practising next to the market place, because he recently graduated as a system engineer and was offered a fix position.

5.2 NATs – identity and status

The word NATs came to my ears very often, straight in the beginning of my fieldwork. NATs mean *Niños y Adolescentes Trabajadores* (Working children and adolescents) but has much more signification than these three words. NATs became a whole identity

²¹ Interview with Ruben 15.06.2014

since the beginning of the working children's movements in Latin America. It is used merely for organized working children who are aware of their rights and their shared struggle.

Through this simple name – much stronger connoted than 'child worker' or 'working child' – the NATs receive immediate recognition and also importance. Through the children's organizations, working children could step from being discriminated to obtain a status filled with importance and pride.

After the approval of new children's bill, the children felt recognized by an even higher instance. They name "NATs" – *Niños y Adolescentes Trabajadores* – entered the legal text, what represented for them a big step in gaining power and self-esteem.

The legal text, delineated above in chapter 2.2.4, demands the children under 14 years old to receive a 'work permit' from the children's responsible at the Ombudsman-offices of their home region ("*defensoría del pueblo*" and "*defensoría de la niñez*"). To receive this permit, children will have to pass different psychosocial and medical examinations. Through various discussions with different people in Bolivia, I heard that there are only a very small percentage of the regional Ombudsman-offices that function how they are supposed to. Without holding any facts, I assume that setting up these examinations and 'work permits' and after that, to hold control upon the "permitted" working children – as the Ombudsman-office is supposed to – will take a very long time. And from my own experience, I also assume that a great part of the working population will not know about these regulations.

Trough my field experience I still see the achievement of the UNATsBO to have their words enter the legal texts and obtain the recognition they claimed for, as fruitful for the status of the NATs children and opening doors for many other changes to be made. So Neysa:

"We will feel more secure and more strengthened. Because before... Well... We were already protected, I was already protected and she as well [pointing Leti] because we are already 14 years old. But my other workmates, not yet. But now, yes, they are protected. More security among us, no?"²²

²² Interview with Neysa 28.06.2014

According to Liebel, this new law is not only as the international media called it a “temporary” solution to help children and their families to cope with poverty, but merely a promise to enable a worthy and satisfying life to people who still have to live in poverty. (Liebel 2014: 12)

The NATs pride of being working children comes, as Liebel underline it from Da Silva Telles & Abramo’s study, from a double appreciation of work. On one side, the children are socialized through work: They meet workmates, new friends and a whole community outside of what was ‘designed’ for them (school, institutions etc.) and by ‘buying their own things’ and be able to afford things that their family could never provide them. On the other side, their contribution to the family budget gives them greater legitimacy within the family, and here also more status. (Liebel 2004: 54)

According to Neysa, to work made her understand what work means and therefore she started to value and appreciate the work and the things that one can afford with money even more.

“[...] Now I am more scared to ask my parents for some money [...] because I have many younger siblings. [...] And now since I work, sometimes I get tired from it, and then I see how tired my parents are from their work, and I appreciate it more.”²³

The NATs-identity is even more increased among the children I was working with by the little blue worker’s vest (“*chaleco*”) described in a footnote in section 4.4 and shown on the cover picture of this thesis. Some of them – usually the most involved children in the organization and the representatives - receive it from the AVE educators. The children, who own such vest, would never forget to wear it during working hours.

Leti: “It gives us recognition, so the people will say: ‘Look this girl with the blue ‘chaleco’, we can hire her for work’ and they see us and like this we get more recognition.”

Neysa: “Yes. And the salesladies as well. They ask us: ‘Are you representative?’ Like Doña Cristina she said today: ‘You are the representative, no?’ And she asked that just because I was wearing the ‘chaleco’. (laughter)”

²³ Interview with Neysa and Leti 21.06.2014

The double function of work for the working children is also to be noticed, so Invernizzi (cited in Liebel 2012: 15): On one side, work is a survival strategy but also as a tool for socialization and the building of identity. For instance, all the children I have met were defending their status and differentiate themselves strongly from other categories of children. They said for example that they are not “*cleferitos*” - children who inhale glue and often live in the streets - and neither they are beggars nor “street children” (“*niños de la calle*”). All the NATs I have met would feel very offended if they would be confused with street kids. So Gerald:

“We don’t steal, we don’t beg. What we are doing is working. It’s helping. [...] We really work. We don’t just ask people to give us money.”²⁴

It became obvious to me that the children want to work, to ‘do something’ in order to earn money. It is better if the earning is bigger, but the main focus is always on the exchange of work against payment. For instance, even the children I was working with knew of my financial means and status, they would never have directly asked me for money, as it can often happen to Westerners in these regions. The children are totally aware of the value of work and what they gain from it beside of the money, so Lucchini:

“Selling something gives the children the feeling of being useful and possessing a certain skill. Even if trade does not function as the child might wish, it knows that it is performing an activity that is not suppressed or merely tolerated. When it begs, the child plays the role of a victim lacking the autonomy to do anything else. The begging child also feels condemned by other children who are also on the street but do not beg. The stigmatization by his peers is felt strongly by the begging child.” (Cited in Liebel 2004: 57)

The NATs also underline that they are not “poor”. So pictured by Miler and Kano, the 15 years old musicians of the Cemetery of Sacaba:

Miler: “Here we don’t have a good economy. You have to take that into account.”

Kano: “Here we are poor! That’s why we are in need... (laughter)”

²⁴ Interview with Gerald 05.07.2014

Me: "Poor?"

Miler: "No, not 'poor'. We have a place where we live and all that but we also need other things because..."

Kano: "Because of necessity. We need for school, for the house, and things like this."²⁵

The reason why most of the children are working is to some extent a specific and individual neediness. But neediness, as pictured in the previous chapters, is not only lack and void, there is also a dynamic element that activate the will to overcome the neediness. Here we can see a dialectic principle of the child worker's organizations, which produce a powerful group dynamics enabling important and positive changes to happen in underprivileged children's lives. On one hand there is the representations of child labour with terms like 'violence', 'poverty', 'exploitation' but on the other hand there is the collective reaction to poverty and exclusion. The NATs stand exactly between these two poles and through this dynamics they create a new horizon of identities, demands, hopes and projects. (Schibotto cited in Liebel 2013: 15)

These children are made aware of their rights and know what 'exploitation' means. By knowing it, they also know that they are not affected by it. And this rises in them pride, worth and empowerment. Thanks to the new status that being NATs give them, they identify their own space in a society that has the tendency to exclude them.

6 Closing words: *Trabajar es crecer* - Working is growing

This thesis sums up what I have learned through this experience that reshaped my understanding of childhood, and on a broader way, of the capacities of human agency. Beside of deconstructing the current Western discourse on child labour, the project enabled me to describe thoroughly where and how the phenomenon of working children is situated in the particular case of the ONATsCO and UNATsBO children in Cochabamba. I could identify the different dynamics and power relations that are negotiating the values and the right to be of working children.

²⁵ Interview with Kano and Miler (02.08.2014)

What I did not manage to depict thoroughly is the 'inner' side of it, the children's world per se. I believe that the 'secret' children's intersubjective sphere, I only could have some glimpses into, would necessitate much more research time to obtain access to and to investigate. However, through the glimpses I was granted to, I could decipher a little part of it, which is represented by the content of this thesis.

When leaving the fieldwork, I had the feeling that I just finished the preparatory work and had established a solid ground for starting to investigate in a "deeper" way in this multifaceted topic.

The project led me to experiment new forms of participatory work to produce knowledge through media and video. I also could explore the possibilities on how knowledge can be elicited with children who see the use of the camera as a game and source of amusement, but also as a challenger, enabling them to improve their self-representation.

With the material gained with the video camera, I edited the film "*Trabajar es crecer*" (Working is growing) as my Master film. In this film I intended to convey the children's point of view and to provide a practical approach to what the critical evaluation of child labour aims to do through social science research. The other goal of the film was to show another image of children's work, in order to provoke reflexion upon the common child labour discourse that is – in my opinion - not questioned enough in Western society.

In fact, when I showed the first rushes of my film material and when I briefly talked about the project (as explained in section 2.2.1), the matter would mostly be characterized as something "sad" by my counterparts. However, after showing the whole film for the first time to some friends, the concordant reaction was "*I don't feel sorry for these children*". In my opinion, this is a reaction to the non-fulfilment of expectations for a film about child labour, when the expectations are positioned within the Western child labour discourse. I believe I succeed in conveying my new gained point of view through the film with the message of hope coming straight from the first concerned: the NATs.

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