

Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint

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by Silvia Federici

Precarious work is a central concept in movement discussions of the capitalist reorganization of work and class relations in today's global economy. Silvia Federici analyzes the potential and limits of this concept as an analytic and organizational tool. She claims reproductive labor is a hidden continent of work and struggle the movement must recognize in its political work, if it is to address the key questions we face in organizing for an alternative to capitalist society. How do we struggle over reproductive labor without destroying ourselves, and our communities? How do we create a self-reproducing movement? How do we overcome the sexual, racial, and generational hierarchies built upon the wage?

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Tonight I will present a critique of the theory of precarious labor that has been developed by Italian autonomist Marxists, with particular reference to the work of Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and also Michael Hardt. I call it a theory because the views that Negri and others have articulated go beyond the description of changes in the organization of work that have taken place in the 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with the globalization process— such as the “precarization of work,” the fact that work relations are becoming more discontinuous, the introduction of “flexy time,” and the increasing fragmentation of the work experience. Their view on precarious labor present a whole perspective on what is capitalism and what is the nature of the struggle today. It is important to add that these are not simply the ideas of a few intellectuals, but theories that have circulated widely within the Italian movement for a number of years, and have recently become more influential also in the United States, and in this sense they have become more relevant to us.

History and Origin of Precarious Labor and Immaterial Labor Theory

My first premise is that definitely the question of precarious labor must be on our agenda. Not only has our relationship to waged work become more discontinuous, but a discussion of precarious labor is crucial for our understanding of how we can go beyond capitalism. The theories that I discuss capture important aspects of the developments that have taken place in the organization of work; but they also bring us back to a male-centric conception of work and social struggle. I will discuss now those elements in this theory that are most relevant to my critique.

An important premise in the Italian autonomists' theory of precarious labor is that the precarization of work, from the late seventies to present, has been a capitalist response to the class struggle of the sixties, a struggle that was centered on the refusal of work, of as expressed in the slogan "more money less work." It was a response to a cycle of struggle that challenged the capitalist command over labor, in a sense realizing the workers' refusal of the capitalist work discipline, the refusal of a life organized by the needs of capitalist production, a life spent in a factory or in office.

Another important theme is that the precarization of work relations is deeply rooted in another shift that has taken place with the restructuring of production in the 1980s. This is the shift from industrial labor to what Negri and Virno call "immaterial labor." Negri and others have argued that the restructuring of production that has taken place in the eighties and nineties in response to the struggles of the sixties has begun a process whereby industrial labor is to be replaced by a different type of work, in the same way as industrial labor replaced agricultural work. They call the new type of work "immaterial labor" because they claim that with the computer and information revolutions the dominant form of work has changed. As a tendency, the dominant form of work in today's capitalism is work that does not produce physical objects but information, ideas, states of being, relations.

In other words, industrial work — which was hegemonic in the previous phase of capitalist development— is now becoming less important; it is no longer the engine of capitalist development. In its place we find "immaterial labor," which is essentially cultural work, cognitive work, info work.

Italian autonomists believe that the precarization of work and the appearance of immaterial labor fulfills the prediction Marx made in the Grundrisse, in a famous section on machines. In this section Marx states that with the development of capitalism, less and less capitalist production relies on living labor and more and more on the integration of science, knowledge and technology in the production process as the engines of accumulation. Virno and Negri see the shift to precarious labor as fulfilling this prediction, about capitalism's historic trend. Thus, the importance of cognitive work and the development of computer work in our time lies in the fact that they are seen as part of a historic trend of capitalism towards the reduction of work.

The precarity of labor is rooted in the new forms of production. Presumably, the shift to immaterial labor generates a precarization of work relations because the structure of cognitive work is different from that of industrial, physical work. Cognitive and info work rely less on the continuous physical presence of the worker in what was the traditional workplace. The rhythms of work are much more intermittent, fluid and discontinuous.

In sum, the development of precarious labor and shift to immaterial labor are not for Negri and other autonomist Marxists a completely negative phenomenon. On the contrary, they are seen as

expressions of a trend towards the reduction of work and therefore the reduction of exploitation, resulting from capitalist development in response to the class struggle.

This means that the development of the productive forces today is already giving us a glimpse of a world in which work can be transcended; in which we will liberate ourselves from the necessity to work and enter a new realm of freedom.

Autonomous Marxists believe this development is also creating a new kind of "common" originating from the fact that immaterial labor presumably represents a leap in the socialization and homogenization of work. The idea is that differences between types of work that once were all important (productive/reproductive work e.g.; agricultural/industrial/"affective labor") are erased, as all types work (as a tendency) become assimilated, for all begin to incorporate cognitive work. Moreover, all activities are increasingly subsumed under capitalist development, they all serve to the accumulation process, as society becomes an immense factory. Thus, e.g. the distinction between productive and unproductive labor also vanishes.

This means that capitalism is not only leading us beyond labor, but it is creating the conditions for the "commonization" of our work experience, where the divisions are beginning to crumble.

We can see why these theories have become popular. They have utopian elements especially attractive to cognitive workers—the "cognitariat" as Negri and some Italian activists call them. With the new theory, in fact, a new vocabulary has been invented. Instead of proletariat we have the "cognitariat." Instead of working class, we have the "Multitude", presumably because the concept of Multitude reveals the unity that is created by the new socialization of work; it expresses the communalization of the work process, the idea that within the work process workers are becoming more homogenized. For all forms of work incorporate elements of cognitive work, of computer work, communication work and so forth.

As I said this theory has gained much popularity, because there is a generation of young activists, with years of schooling and degrees who are now employed in precarious ways in different parts of the culture industry or the knowledge-production industry. Among them these theories are very popular because they tell them that, despite the misery and exploitation we are experiencing, we are nevertheless moving towards a higher level of production and social relations. This is a generation of workers who looks at the "Nine to Five" routine as a prison sentence. They see their precariousness as giving them new possibilities. And they have possibilities their parents did not have or dreamed of. The male youth of today (e.g.) is not as disciplined as their parents who could expect that their wife or partners would depend of them economically. Now they can count on social relationships involving much less financial dependence. Most women have autonomous access to the wage and often refuse to have children.

So this theory is appealing for the new generation of activists, who despite the difficulties of resulting from precarious labor, see within it certain possibilities. They want to start from there.

They are not interested in a struggle for full employment. But there is also a difference here between Europe and the US. In Italy e.g. there is among the movement a demand for a guaranteed income. They call it "flex security." They say, we are without a job, we are precarious because capitalism needs us to be, so they should pay for it. There have been various days of mobilization, especially on May 1st, centered on this demand for a guaranteed income. In Milano, on the May Day of this year, movement people have paraded "San Precario," the patron saint of the precarious worker. The ironic icon is featured in rallies and demonstrations centered on this question of precarity.

Critique of Precarious Labor

I will now shift to my critique of these theories– a critique from a feminist viewpoint. In developing my critique, I don't want to minimize the importance of the theories I am discussing. They have been inspired by much political organizing and striving to make sense of the changes that have taken place in the organization of work, which has affected all our lives. In Italy, in recent years, precarious labor has been one of the main terrains of mobilization together with the struggle for immigrant rights.

I do not want to minimize the work that is taking place around issues of precarity. Clearly, what we have seen in the last decade is a new kind of struggle. A new kind of organizing is taking place, breaking away from the confines of the traditional workplace. Where the workplace was the factory or the office, we now see a kind of struggle that goes out from the factory to the "territory," connecting different places of work and building movements and organizations rooted in the territory. The theories of precarious labor are trying to account for the aspects of novelty in the organization of work and struggle; trying to understand the emergent forms of organization.

This is very important. At the same time, I think that what I called precarious labor theory has serious flaws that I already hinted at in my presentation. I will outline them and then discuss the question of alternatives.

My first criticism is that this theory is built on a faulty understanding of how capitalism works. It sees capitalist development as moving towards higher forms of production and labor. In *Multitude*, Negri and Hardt actually write that labor is becoming more "intelligent." The assumption is that the capitalist organization of work and capitalist development are already creating the conditions for the overcoming of exploitation. Presumably, at one point, capitalism, the shell that keeps society going will break up and the potentialities that have grown within it will be liberated. There is an assumption that that process is already at work in the present organization of production. In my view, this is a misunderstanding of the effects of the restructuring produced by capitalist globalization and the neo-liberal turn.

What Negri and Hardt do not see is that the tremendous leap in technology required by the computerization of work and the integration of information into the work process has been paid at

the cost of a tremendous increase of exploitation at the other end of the process. There is a continuum between the computer worker and the worker in the Congo who digs coltan with his hands trying to seek out a living after being expropriated, pauperized, by repeated rounds of structural adjustment and repeated theft of his community's land and natural sources.

The fundamental principle is that capitalist development is always at the same time a process of underdevelopment. Maria Mies describes it eloquently in her work: "What appears as development in one part of the capitalist faction is underdevelopment in another part."

This connection is completely ignored in this theory; in fact and the whole theory is permeated by the illusion that the work process is bringing us together. When Negri and Hardt speak of the "becoming common" of work and use the concept of Multitude to indicate the new commonism that is built through the development of the productive forces, I believe they are blind to much of what is happening with the world proletariat.

They are blind to not see the capitalist destruction of lives and the ecological environment. They don't see that the restructuring of production has aimed at restructuring and deepening the divisions within the working class, rather than erasing them. The idea that the development of the microchip is creating new commons is misleading. communalism can only be a product of struggle, not of capitalist production.

One of my criticisms of Negri and Hardt is that they seem to believe that the capitalist organization of work is the expression of a higher rationality and that capitalist development is necessary to create the material conditions for communism. This belief is at the center of precarious labor theory. We could discuss here whether it represents Marx's thinking or not. Certainly the Communist Manifesto speaks of capitalism in these terms and the same is true of some sections of the Grundrisse. But it is not clear this was a dominant theme in Marx's work, not at least in Capital.

Precarious Labor and Reproductive Work

Another criticism I have against the precarious labor theory is that it presents itself as gender neutral. It assumes that the reorganization of production is doing away with the power relations and hierarchies that exist within the working class on the basis of race, gender and age, and therefore it is not concerned with addressing these power relations; it does not have the theoretical and political tools to think about how to tackle them. There is no discussion in Negri, Virno and Hardt of how the wage has been and continues to be used to organize these divisions and how therefore we must approach the wage struggle so that it does not become an instrument of further divisions, but instead can help us undermined them. To me this is one of the main issues we must address in the movement.

The concept of the "Multitude" suggests that all divisions within the working class are gone or are no longer politically relevant. But this is obviously an illusion. Some feminists have pointed out that precarious labor is not a new phenomenon. Women always had a precarious relation to waged labor. But this critique goes far enough.

My concern is that the Negrian theory of precarious labor ignores, bypasses, one of the most important contributions of feminist theory and struggle, which is the redefinition of work, and the recognition of women's unpaid reproductive labor as a key source of capitalist accumulation. In redefining housework as WORK, as not a personal service but the work that produces and reproduces labor power, feminists have uncovered a new crucial ground of exploitation that Marx and Marxist theory completely ignored. All of the important political insights contained in those analysis are now brushed aside as if they were of no relevance to an understanding of the present organization of production.

There is a faint echo of the feminist analysis –a lip service paid to it– in the inclusion of so called "affective labor" in the range of work activities qualifying as "immaterial labor." However, the best Negri and Hardt can come up with is the case of women who work as flight attendants or in the food service industry, whom they call "affective laborers," because they are expected to smile at their customers.

But what is "affective labor?" And why is it included in the theory of immaterial labor? I imagine it is included because –presumably– it does not produce tangible products but "states of being," that is, it produces feelings. Again, to put it crudely, I think this is a bone thrown to feminism, which now is a perspective that has some social backing and can no longer be ignored.

But the concept of "affective labor" strips the feminist analysis of housework of all its demystifying power. In fact, it brings reproductive work back into the world of mystification, suggesting that reproducing people is just a matter of making producing "emotions," "feelings," It used to be called a "labor of love;" Negri and Hardt instead have discovered "affection."

The feminist analysis of the function of the sexual division of labor, the function of gender hierarchies, the analysis of the way capitalism has used the wage to mobilize women's work in the reproduction of the labor force—all of this is lost under the label of "affective labor."

That this feminist analysis is ignored in the work of Negri and Hardt confirms my suspicions that this theory expresses the interests of a select group of workers, even though it presumes to speak to all workers, all merged in the great caldron of the Multitude. In reality, the theory of precarious and immaterial labor speaks to the situation and interests of workers working at the highest level of capitalistic technology. Its disinterest in reproductive labor and its presumption that all labor forms a common hides the fact that it is concerned with the most privileged section of the working class. This means it is not a theory we can use to build a truly self-reproducing movement.

For this task the lesson of the feminist movement is still crucial today. Feminists in the seventies tried to understand the roots of women's oppression, of women's exploitation and gender hierarchies. They describe them as stemming from a unequal division of labor forcing women to work for the reproduction of the working class. This analysis was basis of a radical social critique, the implications of which still have to be understood and developed to their full potential.

When we said that housework is actually work for capital, that although it is unpaid work it contributes to the accumulation of capital, we established something extremely important about the nature of capitalism as a system of production. *We established that capitalism is built on an immense amount of unpaid labor, that it not built exclusively or primarily on contractual relations; that the wage relation hides the unpaid, slave -like nature of so much of the work upon which capital accumulation is premised.*

Also, when we said that housework is the work that reproduces not just "life," but "labor-power," we began to separate two different spheres of our lives and work that seemed inextricably connected. We became able to conceive of a fight against housework now understood as the reproduction of labor-power, the reproduction of the most important commodity capital has: the worker's "capacity to work," the worker's capacity to be exploited. In other words, by recognizing that what we call "reproductive labor" is a terrain of accumulation and therefore a terrain of exploitation, we were able to also see reproduction as a terrain of struggle, and, very important, *conceive of an anti-capitalist struggle against reproductive labor that would not destroy ourselves or our communities.*

How do you struggle over/against reproductive work? It is not the same as struggling in the traditional factory setting, against for instance the speed of an assembly line, because at the other end of your struggle there are people not things. Once we say that reproductive work is a terrain of struggle, we have to first immediately confront the question of how we struggle on this terrain without destroying the people you care for. This is a problem mothers as well as teachers and nurses, know very well.

This is why it is crucial to be able to make a separation between the creation of human beings and our reproduction of them as labor-power, as future workers, who therefore have to be trained, not necessarily according to their needs and desires, to be disciplined and regimented in a particular fashion.

It was important for feminists to see, for example, that much housework and child rearing is work of policing our children, so that they will conform to a particular work discipline. We thus began to see that by refusing broad areas of work, we not only could liberate ourselves but could also liberate our children. We saw that our struggle was not at the expense of the people we cared for, though we may skip preparing some meals or cleaning the floor. Actually our refusal opened the way for their refusal and the process of their liberation.

Once we saw that rather than reproducing life we were expanding capitalist accumulation and began to define reproductive labor as work for capital, we also opened the possibility of a process of re-composition among women.

Think for example of the prostitute movement, which we now call the “sex workers” movement. In Europe the origins of this movement must be traced back to 1975 when a number of sex workers in Paris occupied a church, in protest against a new zoning regulation which they saw as an attack on their safety. There was a clear connection between that struggle, which soon spread throughout Europe and the United States, and the feminist movement’s re-thinking and challenging of housework. The ability to say that sexuality for women has been work has led to a whole new way of thinking about sexual relationships, including gay relations. Because of the feminist movement and the gay movement we have begun to think about the ways in which capitalism has exploited our sexuality, and made it “productive.”

In conclusion, it was a major breakthrough that women would begin to understand unpaid labor and the production that goes on in the home as well as outside of the home as the reproduction of the work force. This has allowed a re-thinking of every aspect of everyday life — child-raising, relationships between men and women, homosexual relationships, sexuality in general— in relation to capitalist exploitation and accumulation.

Creating Self-Reproducing Movements

As every aspect of everyday life was re-understood in its potential for liberation and exploitation, we saw the many ways in which women and women’s struggles are connected. We realized the possibility of “alliances” we had not imagined and by the same token the possibility of bridging the divisions that have been created among women, also on the basis of age, race, sexual preference.

We can not build a movement that is sustainable without an understanding of these power relations. We also need to learn from the feminist analysis of reproductive work because no movement can survive unless it is concerned with the reproduction of its members. This is one of the weaknesses of the social justice movement in the US.

We go to demonstrations, we build events, and this becomes the peak of our struggle. The analysis of how we reproduce these movements, how we reproduce ourselves is not at the center of movement organizing. It has to be. We need to go back to the historical tradition of working class organizing “mutual aid” and rethink that experience, not necessarily because we want to reproduce it, but to draw inspiration from it for the present.

We need to build a movement that puts on its agenda its own reproduction. The anti-capitalist struggle has to create forms of support and has to have the ability to collectively build forms of reproduction.

We have to ensure that we do not only confront capital at the time of the demonstration, but that we confront it collectively at every moment of our lives. What is happening internationally proves that only when you have these forms of collective reproduction, when you have communities that reproduce themselves collectively, you have struggles that are moving in a very radical way against the established order, as for example the struggle of indigenous people in Bolivia against water privatization or in Ecuador against the oil companies' destruction of indigenous land.

I want to close by saying if we look at the example of the struggles in Oaxaca, Bolivia, and Ecuador, we see that the most radical confrontations are not created by the intellectual or cognitive workers or by virtue of the internet's common. What gave strength to the people of Oaxaca was the profound solidarity that tied them with each other—a solidarity for instance that made indigenous people from every part of the state to come to the support of the "maestros," whom they saw as members of their communities. In Bolivia too, the people who reversed the privatization of water had a long tradition of communal struggle. Building this solidarity, understanding how we can overcome the divisions between us, is a task that must be placed on the agenda. In conclusion then, the main problem of precarious labor theory is that it does not give us the tools to overcome the way we are being divided. But these divisions, which are continuously recreated, are our fundamental weakness with regard to our capacity to resist exploitation and create an equitable society.