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FCJ-022 From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again: Labour, Life and Unstable Networks

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In Florian Schneider's documentary Organizing the Unorganizables (2002), Raj Jayadev of the DE-BUG worker's collective in Silicon Valley identifies the central problem of temporary labour as one of time. Jayadev recounts the story of 'Edward', a staff-writer for the Debug magazine: 'My Mondays roll into my Tuesdays, and my Tuesdays roll into my Wednesdays without me knowing it. And I lose track of time and I lose hope with what tomorrow's going to be'. Jayadev continues: 'What concerns temp workers the most is not so much a $2 an hour pay raise or safer working conditions. Rather, they want the ability to create, to look forward to something new, and to reclaim the time of life'. How does this desire to create, all too easily associated with artistic production, intersect with the experiences of other workers who engage in precarious forms of labour?

With the transformation of labour practices in advanced capitalist systems under the impact of globalisation and information technologies, there has arisen a proliferation of terms to describe the commonly experienced yet largely undocumented transformations within working life. Creative labour, network labour, cognitive labour, service labour, affective labour, linguistic labour, immaterial labour; these categories often substitute for each other, but in their very multiplication they point to diverse qualities of experience that are not simply reducible to each other. On the one hand these labour practices are the oppressive face of post-Fordist capitalism, yet they also contain potentialities that spring from workers' own refusal of labour and subjective demands for flexibility – demands that in many ways precipitate capital's own accession to interminable restructuring and rescaling, and in so doing condition capital's own techniques and regimes of control.

The complexity of these relationships has amounted to a crisis within modes of organisation based around the paranoid triad: union, state, firm. Time and again, across the past fifteen years, we heard proclamations of the end of the nation-state, its loss of control or subordination to new and more globally extensive forms of sovereignty. Equally, we are now overfamiliar with claims for the decline of trade unions: their weakening before transnational flows of capital, the erosion of salaried labour, or the carefully honed attacks of neoliberal politicians. More recently, the firm itself is not looking so good, riddled with internal instability and corruption for which the names Enron, Worldcom, and Parmalat provide only the barest index. Clearly, the "networked organisation" is not the institutional form best suited to the management of labour and life within information economies and networked socialities. But it is not these tendencies themselves as much as their mutual implications that have led to the radical recasting of labour organisation and its concomitant processes of bargaining and arbitration.

Within the ambit of social movements and autonomous political groups, these new forms of labour organisation have been given the name precarity, an inelegant neologism coined by English speakers to translate the French precarité. Although the term has been in circulation since the early 1980s, it is really only over the past two or three years that it has acquired prominence in social movement struggles. Particularly in the Western European nations, the notion of precarity has been at the centre of a long season of protests, actions, and discussions, including events such as EuroMayDay 2004 (Milan and Barcelona) and 2005 (in seventeen European cities), Precarity Ping Pong (London, October 2004), the International Meeting of the Precariat (Berlin, January 2005), and Precair Forum (Amsterdam, February 2005). [1] [1] According to Milanese activist Alex Foti (2004), precarity is 'being unable to plan one's time, being a worker on call where your life and time is determined by external forces'. The term refers to all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation: from illegalised, seasonal and temporary employment to homework, flex- and temp-work to subcontractors, freelancers or so-called self-employed persons. But its reference also extends beyond the world of work to encompass other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations.

Classically, the story told about precarity is that it was capital's response to the rejection of "jobs for life" and demands for free time and flexibility by workers in the 1970s. Thus the opposite of precarity is not regular work, stable housing, and so on. Rather, such material security is another version of precarity, consuming time, energy, and affective relations as well as producing the anxiety that results from the 'financialisation of daily life' – to steal a felicitous phrase from Randy Martin (2002). Among other things, the notion of precarity has provided a rallying call and connecting device for struggles surrounding citizenship, labour rights, the social wage, and migration. And importantly, these struggles are imagined to require new methods of creative-social organisation that do not make recourse to social state models, trade union solidarities, or Fordist economic structures.

The political challenge is to determine whether the uncertain, unpredictable condition of precarity can operate as an empirical object of thought and practice. Precarity would seem to cancel out the possibility of such an undertaking, since the empirical object is presupposed as stable and contained, whereas, the boundaries between labour, action, and intellect appear increasingly indistinct within a post-Fordist mode of production. Can common resources (political organisation) be found within individual and collective experiences of permanent insecurity? Furthermore, is there a relationship between the potential for political organisation and the technics of communication facilitated by digital technologies? In sum, what promise does precarity offer as a strategy and why has it emerged at this precise historical moment as a key concept for political thought and struggle?

In order to address these questions, we first outline the distinction between "precarity" and "precariousness". In surveying the various ways in which these terms have circulated, we wish to establish a framework within which questions of labour, life and social-political organisation can be understood. The various uncertainties defining contemporary life are carried over – and, we argue, internal to – the logic of informatisation. Our aim, however, is not to collapse respective differences into a totalising logic that provides a definitive assessment or system of analysis; rather, we seek to identify some of the forces, rhythms, discourses and actions that render notions such as creativity, innovation, and organisation, along with the operation of capital, with a complexity whose material effects are locally situated within transversal networks. Where there are instances of inter-connection between, say, the work of migrants packaging computer parts or cleaning offices and that of media labour in a call centre, software development firm or digital post-production for a film studio, we see a common expressive capacity predicated on the dual conditions of exploitation and uncertainty.

Yet to cast the experience of informational labour as exclusively oppressive is to overlook the myriad ways in which new socialities emerge with the potential to create political relations that force an adjustment in the practices of capital. Such collectivities are radically different from earlier forms of political organisation, most notably those of the union and political party. Instead, we find the logic of the network unleashed, manifesting as situated interventions whose effects traverse a combination of spatial scales. The passage from precarity to precariousness foregrounds the importance of relations. It makes sense, then, to also consider the operation of networks, which above all else are socio-technical systems made possible by the contingency of relations.

Uncertainty, Felixibility, Transformation

To begin to grapple with the sort of questions sketched above it is necessary to acknowledge that the concept of precarity is constitutively doubled-edged. On the one hand, it describes an increasing change of previously guaranteed permanent employment conditions into mainly worse paid, uncertain jobs. In this sense, precarity leads to an interminable lack of certainty, the condition of being unable to predict one's fate or having some degree of stability on which to construct a life. On the other hand, precarity supplies the precondition for new forms of creative organisation that seek to accept and exploit the flexibility inherent in networked modes of sociality and production. That the figure of the creative, cognitive, or new media worker has emerged as the figure of the precarious worker par excellence is symptomatic of this ambivalent political positioning. Some commentators have gone as far as to suggest that the collaborative processes and affective relations that characterise artistic work reveal the inner dynamics of the post-Fordist economy. By questioning the boundaries between social labour and creative practice, for instance, Brian Holmes (2004) follows one of the central themes of Italian post-operaista thought, arguing that creative linguistic relation (the very stuff of human intersubjectivity) has become central to contemporary labour regimes.

No doubt there is some truth to the claim that the dynamic relationship between material production and

social reproduction converges, under contemporary capitalism, on the horizon of language and communication. This argument, as developed in the work of thinkers like Christian Marazzi (1999) and Paolo Virno (2004a, 2004b), has been redeployed in any number of contexts to question the boundaries between creative action and social labour. It would be foolish to underestimate the utility of these interventions. But implicit in this tendency to collapse otherwise disparate forms of labour into the containing category of creativity is an eclipse of those forms of bodily, coerced, and unpaid work primarily associated with migrants and women (and not with artists, computer workers, or new media labourers).

In this sense, it is probably not a good thing that precarity has become the meme of the moment. Proclamations of the epoch-breaking character of contemporary labour market transformations, while doubtless augmenting the rhetorical force of the struggles surrounding precarity, inevitably occlude two important facts. First, the current increase of precarious work in the wealthy countries is only a small slice of capitalist history. If the perspective is widened, both geographically and historically, precarity becomes the norm (and not some exception posed against a Keynesian or Fordist ideal of capitalist stability). With this shift in perspective the focus also moves to other forms of work, still contained within the logic of industrial or agricultural production, that do not necessarily abide the no-material-product logic of so-called cognitive, immaterial, or creative labour. Without denying that neoliberal globalisation and the boom-bust dot.com cycle of information technology have placed new pressures on labour markets in the wealthy countries, it is also important to approach this wider global perspective in light of a second fact: that capital too is precarious, given to crises, risk, and uncertainty.

Clearly, the dynamics of capital are intimately linked to social patterns and transformations. To take one example: a glance at the relationship in advanced economies between ageing populations, declining population growth (i.e., birthrates), and a shift away from salaried work points also to the precarity of capital. How to fund a retired population is one of the key policy and electoral issues faced by governments in the advanced economies. The substantial increase in the ranks of retirees over the next two decades coupled with the trend towards casualisation of labour, a decline of growth in the labour force, and a corresponding decline in income tax revenue puts enormous pressure on the funds available for pension schemes (Neilson, 2003). As Henwood (2005) notes, this is an issue for both public and private retirement systems. The “pension crisis” has been part of a government scare campaign aimed at encouraging baby-boomers to redirect pension funds into private schemes and stock market investments. Not only does this have the effect of weakening the public system, but it also increases the level of risk for those investing in the private system, which has a periodic pattern of crashes, market fluctuation, and uncertain returns (see Bakshi and Zhiwu, 1994; Marazzi, 1998; Blackburn, 2002; Starr, 2005).

At the economic level, then, the problematic of an ageing demographic goes beyond both welfarist and neoliberal ideologies – either way, considerable pressure will be placed on the capacity of the capitalist system to effectively deal with the distribution of funds across areas of need (health, education, military expenditure, civic and corporate infrastructure, etc.). One solution proposed by governments has been to extend the age of retirement and swell the ranks of precarious labour. Ultimately this only expands a minimum taxation base and not growth in the labour force, the combined result being a slowdown in economic productivity and GDP (Henwood, 2005). Whether workers directed funds into public or private systems does not detract from the precarity of capital; rather, the example of an ageing demographic and diminishing labour force points to the way in which capital increasingly becomes a system of heightened insecurity.

Labour, Communication, Movement

Importantly, capital has always tried to shore up its own precariousness through the control of labour and, in particular, the mobility of labour. It is the insight of Moulier-Boutang’s De l’esclavage au salariat (1998) to identify the subjective practice of labour mobility as the connecting thread in the history of capitalism. Far from being archaisms or transitory adjustments destined to be wiped out by modernisation, Moulier-Boutang contends that labour regimes such as slavery and indenture are constituent of capitalist development and arise precisely from the attempt to control or limit the worker’s flight. In this perspective, the figure of the undocumented migrant becomes the exemplary precarious worker since, in the current global formation, the entire system of border control and detention technology provides the principal means by which capital controls the mobility of labour. Because the depreciation and precarisation of migrant labour threatens to engulf the workforce as a whole (and because the subjective mobility and resistance of migrants tests the limits of capitalist control), their position becomes the social anticipation of a political option to struggle against the general development of labour and life in the contemporary world (Mezzadra,

2001; Mezzadra, 2004).

A similar argument can be made regarding the un- or under-paid labour of women, both as regards the status of the patriarchal family as the locus of the reproduction of labour power in capitalist societies and preponderance of women in precarious sectors such as care-work, house-work, or call centres (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 292-293, 2004: 110-111; Huws, 2003). Indeed, the Madrid-based group Precarias alla Deriva, which has always resisted the temptation to use the term precarity as a common name for diverse and singular labour situations, has devoted much of its research to the feminisation of precarious work. And the sheer proliferation of women in contemporary labour migration flows means that there is a great deal of convergence between approaches that emphasise the role of border technologies in capital's attempts to minimise its precariousness and those that focus on the ongoing marginalisation and undervaluation of women's work (Anderson, 2000; Gill, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parrenãs, 2001; Huws, 2003).

The point is not to replace the figure of the creative worker with that of the migrant or female care-worker in the discussions and actions surrounding precarity. Nor is it to collapse these various types of labour practice into a composite category, such as the much circulated term precariat (which combines the words precario and proletariat in a single class category). Equally, it is insufficient to subordinate these very different labour practices to a single logic of production (which is the tactic followed by Hardt and Negri when they argue that all forms of labour in the contemporary world, while maintaining their specificity, are transformed and mastered by processes of informatisation). In terms of political practice and strategy, we believe there is something to be gained by holding these labour practices in some degree of conceptual and material separation but articulating them in struggle.

For instance, the fight for open architectures of electronic communication pursued by many creative workers cannot be equated with the subjective practices of mobility pursued by undocumented labour migrants. While these actions might be conjoined on some conceptual horizon (through notions such as exodus or flow), they have distinct (and always highly contextual) manifestations on the ground. There are clearly important differences between copyright regimes and border control technologies, even if both are ultimately held down by the assertion of sovereign power, whether at the national or transnational level. Recognising this, however, does not mean that the struggles surrounding free software and the "no-border" struggles surrounding undocumented migration cannot work in tandem or draw on each other tactically. As the editorial team of Makeworld Paper#3 writes: 'the demand to combine the freedom of movement with the freedom of communication is social dynamite' (Bove et al., 2003).

Precarity, then, does not have its model worker. Neither artist nor migrant, nor hacker nor housewife, there is no precarious Stakhanov. Rather, precarity strays across any number of labour practices, rendering their relations precisely precarious – which is to say, given to no essential connection but perpetually open to temporary and contingent relations. In this sense, precarity is something more than a position in the labour market, since it traverses a spectrum of labour markets and positions within them. Moreover, the at best fleeting connections, alliances and affiliations between otherwise distinct social groupings brings into question much of the current debate around the "multitudes" as somehow constituting a movement of movements. Such a proposition implies a degree of co-ordination and organisation that rarely coalesces at an empirical level beyond the time of the event.

Instances where such affilations have occurred – such as the much mythologised "Battle of Seattle" and subsequent WTO protests – have not, at the end of the day, amounted to any sustained alternative force. The high moment of 2003, which saw a global mobilisation of protestors against the Iraq War, has become lost in the spectral debris of an informatised society. The massive anti-war protests of 15 February 2003 proved impossible to match. And this loss of momentum prompted the recourse to depoliticising debates, such as the perennial toss-up between violence and non-violence in protest and disobedience. While the World Social Forum (WSF) events in Porto Alegre and Mumbai, the European Social Forum (ESF) and, more recently, the participation of civil society in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), have acquired a degree of momentum, it would be a mistake to view such activity in terms of some kind of coherent project of opposition or refusal. Arguably, the new discursive legitimacy obtained by civil society within supranational institutions associated with WSIS is conditioned by the increasing need amongst neoliberal governments for NGOs and social justice organisations to fulfill the role of service provision in the wake of a decimated state system (Rossiter, 2005). [2] [2]

There is little chance, then, that a coherent political opposition will emerge from the organised activities of civil society. Rather, what we see here is a further consolidation of capital. More disconcerting is the likelihood of civil society organisations becoming increasingly decoupled from their material constitution –

that is, the continual formation and reformation of social forces from which they were born. This is a predicament faced by activist movements undergoing a scalar transformation. The system of modern sovereignty, which functioned around the dual axiom of representation and rights, cannot encompass these new modes of organisation. Nor can the postliberal model of governance, which rearranges vertical relations into a horizontal order of differentiated subjectivities. Nonetheless, the problem of scale remains. In the case of social movements that begin to engage with what passes for global civil society, this can entail an abstraction of material constitution that is often difficult to separate from the histories and practices of abstract sociality vis-à-vis capitalism. Such a condition begins to explain why there is a tendency to collapse the vastly different situations of workers into the catch-all categories of the multitudes and precarity. This, if you will, is the logic of the empty signifier. And here lies the challenge, and difficulty, of articulating new forms of social-political organisation in ways that remain receptive to local circumstances that are bound to the international division of labour.

Paradoxically, the increased institutional visibility that attends the action of speech – as seen, for example, by civil society actors participating at WSIS – compounds the invisibility of material constitution. This is why radical political movements must face the question of institutions – a question that brings to the fore fundamental issues surrounding the subject of security, both from the political and anthropological points of view. With shifts in the level of scalar organisation, pressures come to bear upon the primary organisers or advocates of social movements from participants and other actors who demand forms of accountability and transparency. Networks cannot hope to entirely transcend this relation. Even those movements that bring precarity to the fore risk disconnecting from the subject that conditioned their emergence. Thus while networks can be understood as non-representational modes of organising political and social relations, they are nonetheless bound to prevailing discourses and expectations surrounding notions of networked governance. These kinds of tensions may operate as a generative force, resulting in the development of protocols and modes of engagement that enhance the capacities of the network, but they can also result in dysfunctionality and eventual breakdown.

The unresolved relation between social movements and institutions can thus have a distracting effect that obscures the position and actions of the precarious worker. How, for example, are networks to account for the invisibility of exploited workers engaged in the production process? Who, for instance, is the constituent subject of the creative industries? Not, it would seem, those engaged in activities of production and creation – the primary base for ‘the generation and exploitation of intellectual property’. Given that invisibility becomes common, how, then, does a politics of precarity take form? This imperceptibility is, of course, crucial for undocumented migrants who destroy their papers as a means of avoiding the sovereign world of border administration. But such a strategy of invisibility need not obscure the fact that the dark underbelly of the creative industries consists of undocumented labour, domestic labour, those engaged in the assembly production of micro-chips, the toxic impact of such manufacturing on the environment and health of those living adjacent to these industries, and so on and so forth. These actors comprise the subaltern of the new economies. For all the interest by government, business and academic stakeholders to “map” the “value-chain” of the creative industries, there is a tendency to overlook the actual relations of production that enable the internal clusters of creative industry. [3] [3] In this sense, the mapping documents function as agents that proliferate the fantasy of the creative industries as somehow new rather than, as Ursula Huws notes in her feminist political economy of information technology and domestic labour, ‘a continuation of a process that has been evolving for a least the past century and a half’ (2003: 136).

Amid this fluctuating and transforming terrain, it is no accident that the motif of precarity has emerged in recent times as the central platform of the EuroMayDay parade and supposed revitalising force of social movements. Without denying the enormous inventive energy poured into efforts like the San Precario stunts in Italy or the Intermittents du Spectacle campaign in France, it is necessary to ask why precarity presented itself as an important focus at precisely this moment. Certainly it is difficult to correlate this with any sudden jump in the numbers of precarious workers, since in the advanced economies their ranks have been gradually swelling since the onset of post-Fordist capitalism. Nor is it sufficient to attribute this move to a vanguard logic by which a central core of activists used the notion of precarity to grow (or replenish) the ranks of social movements. This is so even though the “subvertising” efforts of groups like Chainworkers and Molleindustria self-consciously deploy networked communication and design as a means for making radical political activity attractive to young people who purportedly have no memory of class struggle.

Crucial to understanding the turn to precarity in nongovernmental politics is to situate it historically in relation to the anti-war protests and the difficulty in maintaining their momentum as the U.S. led invasion of

Iraq unfolded. For many who had protested for the first time (or for the first time in many years) in 2003, the failure of the anti-war actions to stop the invasion of Iraq was a severe object lesson, a harsh warning about the limits of political expression. Doubtless there were tactical errors and, in many contexts, the anti-war movement swelled its ranks by appealing to nationalist sentiments that immediately modulated into support for the troops once the hostilities began. This lead to difficulties of organisation and mobilisation that severely tested the upbeat and progressive logic of expansion and multiplication that many had applied to the movement from the time of Seattle. At the same time, there was an increased awareness of security in the post-911 environment with heightened rhetoric about terrorism in the mainstream media, images of detainees bound and gagged in Guantanamo, and the first news of the kidnappings and beheadings in Iraq. As many have argued, a pervasive politics of fear settled over the advanced capitalist nations, somewhat independently of whether they deployed troops in Iraq or not. Is it any accident that the concern with precarity and the increased instability of labour came to the fore in this situation of perceived insecurity?

We suggest the emergence of precarity as a central political motif of the global movement relates not only to labour market conditions but also to the prevalent moods and conditions within advanced capitalist societies at a time of seemingly interminable global conflict. Once again this brings the doubled-edged nature of precarity to the fore. For while precarity provides a platform for struggle against the degradation of labour conditions and a means of imagining more flexible circumstances of work and life, it also risks dovetailing with the dominant rhetoric of security that emanates from the established political classes of the wealthy world. This is particularly the case for those versions of precarity politics that place their faith in state intervention as a means of improving or attenuating the worsening conditions of labour.

Prominent among these is the call for flexicurity, which involves a campaign for a new form of welfare to protect workers without renouncing to flexibility. While such proposals have had little traction in English-speaking countries where state-funded unemployment benefits have morphed into work-for-the-dole and Third Way “mutual obligation” schemes, they have in Western Europe often taken the form of calls to extend Dutch labour market reforms to the whole of the E.U. (see, for instance, Foti, 2004). These reforms, which guarantee flex workers more secure employment, better pay and welfare entitlements as their duration in this type of work increases, are not neglible for regularised citizen-resident workers. But they certainly do not extend to undocumented migrants. Moreover, the recourse to state policy as a means of reducing precarity fosters the belief that the state can and must stabilise the precariousness of capital.

This applies equally to those calls for flexicurity that go beyond the Dutch reforms by calling for a social wage or guaranteed income that the state would pay to citizens in recognition of the fact that it is now life itself and not just labour that contributes to the production of wealth (Fumagalli, 2005). Quite apart from the tireless question of revolution versus reform, there is the danger that this sort of measure, insofar as it casts the state (or perhaps sovereign power in some other-than-state form) as the provider of continuity and certainty, reinforces the dominant rhetoric of security in a period of global war. For while the circulation of media rhetoric about terror has generated a heightened sense of insecurity in the wealthy countries, the sovereign response to this situation has been an unprecedented subtraction of liberties and increasingly rigorous policing of society – on all scales and often in novel and flexible forms. It is thus understandable that the term flexicurity, which usually applies to labour reforms in the Northern European countries, might be mistaken as a description of those new, more flexible strategies of global policing that the U.S. military has adopted following the model of one of the most prolific employers of precarious labour in North America, Wal-Mart (see Davis, 2003).

Ontological Insecurity in the USA

Undoubtedly, current perceptions of insecurity are complex and cannot be traced to a single source such as global terrorism, precarity at work, environmental risk, or exposure to the volatility of financial markets (say through pension investments and/or interest rates). At the existential level, these experiences mix or work in concert to create a general feeling of unease. And the conviction that the state (whether conceived on the national scale or in terms of some more extensive sovereign entity like the E.U.) can provide stability in any one of these spheres is not necessarily separable from the notion that it can eliminate risk and contingency in another. Not only does this imply that the struggle against precarity, if not carefully conceived, may bolster and/or feed off state-fueled security politics, but also it suggests that there is something deeper about precarity than its articulation to labour alone would suggest – some more fundamental, but never foundational, human vulnerability, that neither the act nor potential of labour can exhaust.

This is certainly the sense in which Judith Butler, in Precarious Life (2004), confronts what she calls precariousness (which should be distinguished from precarity intended in the labour market sense). For Butler, precariousness is an ontological and existential category that describes the common, but unevenly distributed, fragility of human corporeal existence. A condition made manifest in the U.S. by the events of 911, this fundamental and pre-individual vulnerability is subject to radical denial in the discourses and practices of global security. For instance, Butler understands President George W. Bush's 921 declaration that 'our grief has turned to anger and our anger to resolution' to constitute a repudiation of precariousness and mourning in the name of an action that purports to restore order and to promote the fantasy that the world formerly was orderly. And she seeks in the recognition of this precariousness an ethical encounter that is essential to the constitution of vulnerability and interdependence as preconditions for the "human".

Key to Butler's argument is the proposition that recognition of precariousness entails not simply an extrapolation from an understanding of one's own precariousness to an understanding of another's precarious life but an understanding of 'the precariousness of the Other'. Her emphasis is on the relationality of human lives and she sees this not only as a question of political community but also as the basis for theorising dependency and ethical responsibility. Rather than seeking to describe the features of a universal human condition (something that she claims does not exist or yet exist), she asks who counts as human. And with this reference to humans not regarded as humans, she seeks not a simple entry of the 'excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?' (2004: 33). At this level, the theorisation of precariousness impinges on fundamental ontological questions and, to this extent, it suggests a means of joining some of the actions and arguments surrounding precarity to a more philosophically engaged encounter with notions such as creativity, contingency, and relation.

As noted above, Butler's argument, while claiming to affect an ontological insurrection, takes shape above all in the post-911 United States. A passionate appeal for the necessity of critique under circumstances where popular energies have rallied around the executive branch of government, Precarious Life understandly focuses on the progress of global war and the transformations of life within the U.S. polity. But it also presents precariousness as a general principle of the human (and who counts as such). And while it emphasises the uneven distribution of this basic human fragility, it does not analyse the workings of this unevenness in detail (as if they were merely given, coincidental and outside the realm of fundamental ontology). In other words, Butler does not explore the whole problematic of global capitalism and its relations to the current conflict. [4] [4] Certainly these relations are of a complex order and cannot be reduced to the simple formula ("no blood for oil") that would have war working always in the service of capital and vice versa.

In a world where the operations of the global market (by which any object, regardless of location, can be valued and ordered) do not necessarily accord with the logic of strategy (by which spatially fixed resources, subject to calculation and command in the aggregate, are brought under control by state actors), there are likely discrepancies to exploit between the workings of capital and the enterprise of security (Neilson, forthcoming). For instance, the effort to block the flow of laundered money that funds terror networks requires a tightening of regulation on that very institution that lies at the heart of global neoliberal enterprise, the deregulated financial market (Napoleoni, 2003). Indeed, it may be in these gaps, where security and capital come into conflict, that the motif of precarious life receives its most radical articulation, where precariousness meets precarity, and the struggle against neoliberal capitalism that dominated the global movement from Seattle might finally work in tandem with the struggle against war. Such a realisation must be central to any politics that seeks to reach beyond the limits of precarity as a strategy of organisation.

Butler's recognition of precariousness as a fundamental condition of human relation is not without its relevance for the debates surrounding current networked economies and labour market trends. Far from asserting some foundational base of human nature, she focuses attention on the never-stable relations that invest human patterns of interdependence and cooperation. To this extent her understanding of the human veers, on the one hand, from the cognitivism of say Noam Chomsky (1988), who asserts that the human is possessed of an innate creativity due to the innovative capacity of language, and, on the other, from the anthropologism of Arnold Gehlen (1988), who contends that the human propensity for flexible adaption to the environment is the font of restless creativity not shared by animals.

Importantly, the emphasis on vulnerability and injury that invests Butler's account of the politics of relation challenges the social philosophies that follow from these lines of thought: the need for human society to

foster innate creative capabilities under the sign of social justice (Chomsky) and the need for authoritarian social institutions to control and direct the human capacity for flexibility (Gehlen). But if her thought is to be adapted to suit the conditions of a labour market that values flexibility and communicational-linguistic relations, it is necessary to add the element of innovation to the ontological mix. Otherwise, her valuable ethical and political insights risk detachment from the organisational and biological circumstances of contemporary capitalist relations.

Innovative Capacities and Common Resources

Key to understanding the human capacity for innovation is the recognition that such change is not the norm but the exception, something that occurs rarely and unexpectedly. Virno (2004b) pursues a reading of paragraph 206 Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, concerning the impossibility of applying rules, in an attempt to understand the conditions of such an exception and their radical difference from organisational models that aim to extract an economic value from creative practices. Crucial for Virno in Wittgenstein's understanding of normative or rule-governed behaviour is that the rule can never specify the conditions of its application – e.g., there is no rule that specifies how high the tennis ball can be thrown during service. For such a specification to be made, another rule about the application of rules would have to be instituted, and so on to an infinite regress, just as in the normative legal system of judicial precedent. Creative innovation, however, requires a mode of action that escapes this formal space of regulation.

The parallel here to the theory of the political state of exception (explored by thinkers such as Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben) is intentional. Just as Schmitt bases his political theory on the notion of the sovereign decision, which cannot be reduced to the infinite regress of legal precedent, so Virno contends that the innovative action must break with the regularity of habit and the regulation of convention. In the exception, the rule becomes indistinguishable from its application, or, to put it another way, each event or action rewrites the grammar of the system. The innovative action is thus not simply a transgression that breaks the rules – a kind of avant-garde contestation of existing institutional arrangements. Rather, it is an action that involves an abrogation of rules, a fundamental recasting of grammatical propositions, and a consequent redefining of future generative possibilities. For all this, it is not a sovereign action (a kind creatio ex nihilo that finds its apotheosis in the romantic ideal of the artist as god). Innovative action is necessarily intersubjective action, forged in the complex and unstable relations between brains and bodies. Its model is not the sovereign who decides on the exception but the language or form-of-life that changes through what might be called a non-sovereign decision, at once distributed and diffuse, or, if you like, an exception-from-below. This is why phrases such as "innovation culture" or indeed "creative industries" ring of an oxymoronic disingenuousness that wants to suggest that innovation can coexist with or become subordinated to the status quo. In this context, innovation becomes nothing other than a code word for more of the same – the reduction of creativity to the formal indifference of the market.

At the same time, Virno recognises that this reduction is precisely what contemporary capitalist production mandates. If, for Butler, human relation is possessed by a precariousness that furnishes a complex sense of political community, Virno argues that this same instability comes to invest the labour relation that, under post-Fordist capitalism, demands creative linguistic innovation. At stake for him is an affirmation of Marx's notion of general intellect. Common to the disparate situations and conditions of individuals and their social horizons is a shared capacity to draw on the resources at hand. And this is why Virno and other postoperaista thinkers have advocated exodus as opposed to revolution as a political tactic. Such an advocacy of escape or "engaged withdrawal" does not imply a hermetic retreat from modernity. Rather, it involves both the recognition that capitalism removes the means for living other than by recourse to wage labour and the imperative to search for strategies and opportunities that allow collective intellect to subtract its creativity from the integuments of productive labour. What interests us is the form that such an exodus might assume within contemporary socio-technical formations characterised by a proliferation of networks alongside a host of institutions that are becoming increasingly burdened and recondite.

Whatever the current possibilities for desertion or exodus, it is hard to escape the observation that the corporate-state nexus increasingly asserts a sovereign command over the very matter of our bodies. With the informatisation of social and economic relations, intellectual property is the regime of scarcity through which control is exerted over the substance of life. Think of the rush to patent recombinant DNA sequences or the pressure placed upon agricultural industries and government representatives to adopt genetically modified organisms. Despite the dot.com crash of 2000, stocks in biotech industries are again yielding substantial profits – a phenomenon fueled in part by aging populations anxious to invest in narratives of security and technologies of arrested decay. This revival of biotech stocks can also be seen as a response

to the affective economy associated with the shift of venture capital into the business of bio-terrorism and a move from what Melinda Cooper (2004) calls the irrational exuberance of nineties speculative capital into an era of indefinite insecurity and permanent catastrophe within a post-911 environment.

Yet where resides the space of commons exterior to both the state and the interests of the market? Indeed, is it even possible to invoke this sense of exteriority within an ontological and social-technical field of immanence and political economy in which capital interpenetrates the matter of life? It is no longer feasible to draw a homology between the commons and the notion of the public – a social body too easily assumed as co-extensive with the citizen-subject. Both the citizen-subject and the public are categories that refer particularly to European and North American political legacies that have long since declined as constituent powers of democratic polities (see Montag, 2000 and Nowotny, 2005).

If "the public" has become a non sequitur vis-à-vis the informational state, there is nonetheless a persistence of social desires to create 'modulations of feeling' whose logic of expression is antithetical to the strictures of control set forth by the informational state. [5] [5] The widespread practice of file-sharing within peer-to-peer networks is routinely cited by many as an exemplary instance of resistance to the closure of the commons by IPRs. The increasing adoption of open source software and Creative Commons by governments and businesses across the economic spectrum is another example of a kind of reverse engineering of the super-structure by the educative capacity of civil society and informational social movements. Certainly, we would not want to underestimate the positive potential of such transformations and redefinitions of information societies. Yet just as it is clear that such activities endow networks with an organisational force, so too is it uncertain whether substantive change will eventuate in the material situation of precarious labour and life.

One could also speak of a continuum of affect, of communication and sociality, that functions as the pre-individual reality or common from which the refrain of precarity is individuated as a series of iterations on labour and life. To be sure, there is a common material basis at work here, one whose constituent forces emerge from a growing indistinction between intellect, labour and political action. This intermingling, however, is accompanied by a mutable process of adaptation in which a symbiotic relation between labour and capital 'has given life to a sort of paradoxical "communism of capital"' (Virno, 2004a: 111). Such a transformation of capital is manifest in the attacks made in the 1960s and 70s "failed revolutions" against the determining power of the Fordist welfare state and corrosive effects of wage labour upon life in general. Again, it is the doubleness of precarity that is the substrate of post-Fordist capital – a desire for greater flexibility and perceived freedom to choose one's style of work (the expressive capacity of labour-power) coupled with an increased uncertainty, not to mention frequent struggle, that is normative to the experience of life (ontological insecurity).

Communicative Networks and Creative Expression

It is one thing to think innovation as a common resource outside the phantasm of total market control; it is another to consider the operation of such a resource. Here we find it necessary to engage the materialities of communication in order to illuminate further the exceptional quality of innovation. In so doing we introduce the political concept of the "constitutive outside" and proceed to an analysis of the creative industries. Our interest is to discern the ways in which the ontology of precariousness is immanent to networked systems of communication. How, we wonder, do the internal dynamics of social-technical communication constitute an ontology that oscillates between uncertainty, fluctuation, and fleeting association on the one hand, and moments of intensity, hope, and exhilaration on the other? In what ways are global information systems embedded in singular patterns of life? Is it possible for the pre-individual, linguistic-cognitive common – or general intellect – to operate as a transcendent biopolitical force by which living labour asserts a horizon of pure virtuality (unforeseen capacity to create and invent)? How might an ontology of networks be formulated, and does creative potential subsist in networks of social-technical relations?

The technics of communication are always underpinned by a "constitutive outside" (Rossiter, 2004). The outside holds an immanent relation with the inside. While the outside occupies a minor status within systems of communication, it nonetheless operates as a field of material, symbolic and strategic forces that condition the possibility of emergence of the inside (Mouffe, 2000: 12; Deleuze, 1988: 43). At the level of discourse, the constitutive outside functions to establish the limits of expression. Most creative industries policy and academic research, for instance, is still to address the casualised insecure working conditions of those who generate the intellectual property that is exploited within an informational, knowledge economy.

[6] [6] In this case, the needs, interests, demands and effects of precarious labour are excluded from the discourse of creative industries, yet, paradoxically, they are a primary element in the network of conditions that make possible the economic development derived from cultural production and service labour.

At the level of materiality, the constitutive outside precedes the exteriority of technical, economic, geographic, institutional, social and cultural configurations that shape the hegemon of communication systems. The constitutive force of the outside enables the exteriority of relations that comprise the complex form of informational, economic and social systems. Complexity, however, is not something that is easily accommodated in the genre of policy and the activities of what remain vertically integrated institutional settings. Much creative industries discourse in recent years places an emphasis on the potential for creative clusters, hubs and precincts as the social-urban arrangement or model that is supposedly the conduit best suited to the establishment of cultural economies. Along with “mapping documents” that set out to demonstrate “value-chains” of innovation based on the concentration of a range of cultural activities and stakeholders, this focus points to the inherent fragility of cultural economies.

In short, there is little empirical correspondence between the topography of “mapping documents” and “value-chains” and the actual social networks and cultural flows that comprise the business activities and movement of finance capital, information and labour-power within creative economies. Such attempts to register the mutual production of economic and creative value are inherently reductive systems. Capital always exceeds regimes of control, inevitably destabilising the delicate balance between determinacy and indeterminacy, regulation and inherent precariousness. And for this reason we maintain that capital is a force whose dynamic is shaped considerably by cultural and social inputs whose register, while largely undetected, comprises a common from which new social forces and modes of creative organisation may proliferate.

Political economy remains a useful idiom of analysis in the identification of the uneven distribution of resources that enable the vertical organisation of capital. Such critical approaches can be usefully expanded by incorporating work like that of Niklas Luhmann, which understands communication systems to necessarily involve a moment of organisational closure. For any communicative system to cohere, there must be an instantiation of closure, however temporary and contingent that may be. Such closure is nonetheless subject to the interpenetrative force of the outside. This is necessary if a system is to remain dynamic and hold a capacity for change. Feedback is internal to the organisational closure of communication systems (Bateson, 1972; Rossiter, 2003). These features of communication systems correspond with the operation of networks. An ontology of networks is thus precipitated by the combinatory dynamic of feedback, the outside and temporary closure. Given its transformative capacity, the outside can be seen as resource for strategic renewal and intervention. Thus the outside can be understood to correspond with a commons of otherwise distinct forms of labour and life.

The implication for creative expression as it manifests in the variegated patterns of labour within informational economies can be summarised as follows: the regulation of labour-power is conditioned by the dual regime of scarcity and border control. Scarcity consists of that which is perceived and constructed as finite and inscribed with economic value (e.g., the logic of IPRs). Boundaries confer the expressive form of creative labour and its concomitant networks with either discursive legitimacy and economic value or disavowal and the suspension of movement. The governance of networks, however, is not so straightforward or easily defined. If the ontic of networks is underscored by interpenetration and disequilibrium – as evidenced, for example, in the fragile life of mailing lists, prone as they are to rapid destruction, irrelevance and closure if actors such as “trolls” are unchecked (Lovink, 2003) – then it becomes much harder to generalise about the expressive capacity of social-technical life as it subsists in a state of permanent construction.

For all the talk in creative industries policy and analysis of unleashing the creative potential of cultural workers, what comes to pass is the reproduction of the same. Such an economy is, after all, exercised through the model of clusters. Who ever said Feudalism was eclipsed by the modern state system? Despite the pervasiveness of creative and cultural networks within government policies and academic literature, one is hard pressed to find evidence of networks in any operative sense. Projects that assemble a range of actors or stakeholders within a cultural precinct or business park are simply not the same as networks. For our purposes, networks consist of social-technical relations that are immanent to the media of communication. The collaborations that ensue within communicative networks are frequently promiscuous, unlike the “old boys” style of partnerships developed in what is much better defined as the cluster model of the creative industries.

This structural feature of the creative industries gives rise to the alienation of living labour in ways that are essentially the same as the mechanisms by which industrial capitalism exerted its demand for surplus value premised on class distinctions. It is no wonder that enthusiasts within the creative industries expend great rhetorical energy on proliferating the meme of horizontal distribution and connection. Such a technique of obfuscation serves as a generative device and electoral panacea for governments desperate to promote an antidote to the problem of how to best manage and control populations perched on the edge of chronic unemployment in an increasingly automated economy which casts the task of material labour to the countries with a lower cost of labour.

It is highly unlikely that the creative industries will begin to register in their mapping documents or annual reports the dark side of labour (domestic, care and migrant labour, for instance) and environmental degradation that attends any process of industrialisation. Similarly, young people working in the cultural and new media industries will most certainly be deprived of realising any ambitions of creative autonomy. Despite the various efforts to benchmark economic productivity, creative activities and partner linkages within the creative industries, there is great variation in terms of what creative industries mean for various stakeholders. The material complexity of cultural production is a rarely evident in creative industries policy, which is consistently unchanging. And while this is indicative of the limits of policy as a genre of expression and routine of practices, there is nevertheless an implicit belief that government and business interests can be realised in some sort of instrumental fashion.

Arguably, the tendency by both academics and policy-makers to adopt economistic approaches to understanding creative industries discloses an uncertainty about how economies are shaped by diverse forces that often have cultural and social underpinnings non-assimilable to the genre of the policy report or academic treatise. This can lead to a misrecognition of the material conditions affecting finance markets and an overestimation of the kind of economic benefits accruing for creative workers. The international push to develop so-called “creative cities”, for example, will more readily support a tourist and service economy that enhances speculative capital associated with urban real-estate developments than it will instantiate the creative autonomy of workers in the media, design and cultural industries. In any case, all markets are subject to volatile and largely unpredictable fluctuations, a point not lost on Justin O’Connor in his recent essay on “innovative clusters” and “tacit knowledge” in “creative cities” (2004: 133). Creative innovation within a regime of intellectual property rights is a contradiction of terms. And while an increasing number of creative industries style projects adopt a Creative Commons licence, a normative juridical framework nonetheless underpins the trajectory of creativity. Parallel to these utopic ghettoes for those in possession of disposable incomes and investment portfolios will be an ongoing preoccupation within government for expanding security legislation and border control.

In focussing here on labour-power and the ways in which exclusion makes possible the internal coherence of creative industries, our intention is not to somehow make secondary the situation of precarious life. The various forms of exclusion detailed hold implications for the capacity of living labour to maintain a sense of renewal within a state of ontological insecurity. Indeed, as maintained earlier, labour and life occupy a common space of indistinction. Yet stripped of all guarantees, life and labour have one option left: political action. And the potentiality for political action as a transformative force is what cultivates the generation of fear by the dominant political powers. Potentiality itself is an uncertain force – a precarious resource common to labour and life – and as such, is the basis for innovation from which new forms of organisation and life may become instituted.

Freedom without Security

It is worth recalling that the precondition of surplus-value is cooperation. In this sense, the potential for alternative modalities of organising creative labour is inseparable from the uncertain rhythms, fluctuations and manifestations of global capital. Indeed, it is precisely this relation between labour-power and capital that defines the immanence of socio-technical networks. Given these mutual dependencies, it is not beyond reason to imagine that variations of living labour might, as Jayadev noted at the start of this essay, ‘reclaim the time of life’. Such interventions are not as radical as they might sound. But they nonetheless involve transforming precarity as a normative condition precipitated by the demands of capital.

In the case of creative labour, a reclaiming of the time of life entails a shifting of values and rhetoric away from an emphasis on the exploitation of intellectual property (and thus labour-power) and reinstating or inventing technics of value that address the uncertainties of economic and ontological life. Engaging rather than sublimating the antagonisms inherent to such experiences is, in part, a matter of rethinking networked

modes of relation. The many accounts, events and analyses on precarity documented earlier in this essay begin to tell the story of social-political networks seeking to institute creative projects responsive to situations of living labour. The communication of such efforts begins to comprise a history of networks as they subsist within an informational present. Moreover, we find here a common resource from which lessons, models, and ideas may be exchanged and repurposed as transformative techniques.

Such processes, however, are by no means straightforward. By posing the question of the unstable ontology of networks alongside that of migration and border control, we are forced to think together the precarity that invests the labour relation and the regime of border reinforcement, which is one of the primary registers of the current ubiquity of war. Earlier we cited the creators of a free newspaper and collaborative filtering project who described as 'social dynamite' the attempt to combine freedom of communication with freedom of movement. But the effects of this social dynamite are disparate and, in their very multiplicity, inflate the tendency to treat these phenomena as separate moments. Such a disconnection again poses the question of commonality and the resources it might supply for the imagination of alternative forms of life.

The ongoing tussle between those who cast the creative worker as the precarious labourer par excellence and those who assign this role to the undocumented migrant is one symptom of this divide. Such a debate is certainly worth having, but it also misses the point: that being, to alter the circumstances in which capital meets life. All too often the precarity struggle revolves about the proposition life is work. But the challenge is not to reaffirm the productivism implicit in this realisation but rather to take it as the basis for another life – a life in which contingency and instability are no longer experienced as threats. A life in which, as Goethe wrote in Faust II, many millions can 'dwell without security but active and free'.

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Notes

[1] Over the past year there has been a proliferation of magazines, journals and mailing lists exploring the theme of precarity and the associated problematic of labour organisation. These include Greenpepper, Mute, Multitudes, republicart, ephemera, European Journal of Higher Arts Education, Derive Approdi, and aut-op-sy.

[back] [7]

[2] These issues were among many debated at the recent incommunicado.05: information technology for everybody else conference held in Amsterdam, 16-17 June 2005, http://incommunicado.info/conference. See also Incommunicado mailing list archive.

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[3] The articles on "creative networks" published in an issue of Media International Australia edited by O'Regan, Gibson and Jeffcut (2004) adroitly diagnose the shortcomings of the "creative cluster" model. The analyses of inter-linkages between local practices of production and consumption and global policy frameworks goes some way toward identifying the complexity of network systems. And their advocacy for 'strategic research and policy…[that] build[s] situated knowledges' is something we also support. Even so, their discussion of "creative networks" nevertheless falls short of attending to the problem of precarity that defines the situation for many within the creative industries. The contribution by Chris Gibson and Daniel Robinson (2004) on creative networks and working conditions in regional Australia is an exception. But their analysis of employment statistics and informal social networks is divorced from a consideration of the subjective dimension of socio-technical systems and the substantive role of subjectivity in the construction of networks.

[back] [9]

[4] While more expansive on the global dimensions of this problematic, David Harvey (2003) also remains primarily within a U.S. political imaginary. See also Arrighi (2005a, 2005b).

[back] [10]

[5] Our use of 'modulation of feeling' is opposite to that of Massumi (2005: 32), who attributes such an operation of biopower to the Bush administration's need to manage populations in a post-9/11 environment in which 'timing was everything'.

[back] [11]

[6] While a recent UNCTAD (2004: 3) policy report notes that 'too often [creative industries are] associated with a precarious form of job security', such observations remain the exception within much policy-making and academic research on the creative industries. A recent issue of The International Journal of Cultural Policy, edited by David Hesmondhalgh and Andy C. Pratt (2005), tables some of the most sophisticated research on cultural and creative industries to date. See also O'Regan, Gibson and Jeffcutt (2004), Gill (2002), and Ross (2003).

[back] [12]

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