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

In Florian Schneider’s documentary Organizing the Unorganizable (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 track with what tomorrow’s going to be”. Jayadev continues: “What concerns temp workers the most is not so much a $2 an hour pay 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 very complex and experienced yet largely undocumented transformations within working life. Creative labour, network labour, cognitive labour, service labour, affective labour, domestic 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’ refusal of labour and subjective demands for flexibility – demands that in many ways precipitate capital’s own access to interminable restructuration 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 over familiar 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 sociologies. But it is not these tendencies themselves as much as their mutual implications that have led to the radical restating of labour organisation, and its concomitant processes of bargaining and arbitrating.

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 critics such as the Luddite and The Egoist composer Rossiter.

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 lot of public discussion, 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 Precarir Forum (Amsterdam, February 2005). 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 interlocking 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. In contrast, 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 in theigrant offices and that of media labour in a call centre, software development firm or digital 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 adjustment in the practice 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 transpose a combination of spatial scales. The passage from precarity to precariousness and precarious collective – the potential for political organisation and 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 contingent of relations.

Uncertainty, Flexibility, Transformation

To begin to grapple with the sort of questions sketched above it is necessary to acknowledge that the concept of precarity is constitutively double-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 on 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 productive 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-structuralist thought, arguing that creative linguistic productivity (or 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 conveys, under contemporary capitalism, on the power of language and communication. This argument, as developed in the work of thinkers like Christian Marazzi (1998), seeks to challenge the figure of the creative worker with that of the migrant or female care-worker in the discussions and actions surrounding also to collapse these various types of labour practice into a composite category, such as the much circulated term precariat (which combines the words precarious and proletariat) into the former 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 capital). In terms of policy practice and strategy, we believe there is something to be gained by holding these labour practices across a range 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 conjured on some conceptual horizon (through notions such as exodus or flow), they have distinct (and almost always 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 PaperJ writes: “the demand to combine the freedom of movement with the freedom of communication is social dynamite” (Bowe et al., 2003).

Precarity, then, does not have its model worker. Neither artist nor migrant, nor hacker nor housewife, there is no precarious Skakanov. 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 distinctly social groups 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. 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 happens to global capital, they can entail an abstraction of material constitution that is often difficult to separate from the histories and practices of abstract social capital (as-us). 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 the precariats (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.

The point is not to replace the figure of the precarious worker since, in the current global world, 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 merely reside on 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 on a light of a second fact: that capitalist too is precarious, given to crises, risk, and uncertainty.

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 soralariat (1998) to identify the subjective practice of labour mobility as the connecting thread in the history of capitalism. Far from being anarchistic or transitory adjustments destined to be wiped out 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 merely reside on 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 on a light of a second fact: that capitalist too is precarious, given to crises, risk, and uncertainty.

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. It 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 labor market sense). For Butler, precariousness is an ontological and existential category that describes the common, yet unevenly distributed condition of human corporeal existence. A condition made manifest in the U.S. by the events of 911, this fundamental and pre-industrial vulnerability is subject to radical denial in the discourses and practices of global security. For instance, Butler understands President George W. Bush’s 9/11 declaration that “our griots are called anger and our anger to resolution” to constitute a repudiation of precariousness and mourning in the name of a common, yet unevenly distributed, condition of human vulnerability, 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 human 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
Creative innovation, however, requires a mode of action that escapes this formal space of regulation. Whatever the current evidentiality for or against innovation or exordium, it is hard to escape the observation that the corporate-state nexus increasingly alters a sovereign command over the very matter of our bodies. With the informationalisation of social and economic relations, intellectual property is the regime of scarcity through which control is exerted over the substance to which the rush to patent recombiant 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 fuelled 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, it is even possible to invoke this sense of exteriority within an ontological and social-technical field of communication, 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 precarious as a strategy of organisation.

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 extract an economic value from creative practices. Crucial for Virno in Wittgenstein’s understanding of normative or rule-governed behaviour is that there 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.

Communicative Networks and Creative Expression

It is one thing to think innovation as a common resource outside the phantasm of total market control, but 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 that produce the political concept of the ‘constitutive outside’ and proceed to an analysis of the creative industries. Our interest is to discover in which 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 mitigate or produce the ontological fetish of innovation 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 capacity – the subject as a transcendent biopolitical force by which labouring as a horizon of pure virutality (unforeseen capacity to create and invent)? How might an ontology of networks be formulated, and does creative potential subsist in networks of social-technical co-production?

Much creative industries discourse in recent years places an emphasis on the potential for creative clusters, hubs and precints as the social-urban arrangement that 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 the reality of creative industries discourse. Creative industries discourse in recent years places an emphasis on the potential for creative clusters, hubs and precints as the social-urban arrangement that 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.
or business park are simply not the same as networks. For our purposes, networks consist of social-technical relations that are independent of the media of communication. The collaborations that ensue within communicative networks are frequently very intense, unlike the ‘old boy’ style of partnerships developed in what is much better defined as the cluster model of the creative industries.

**Freedom without Security**

It is worth recalling that the precondition of surplus-value is consumption. 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 presented 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 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 begin to tell the story of networks as they begin to tell the story of networks as they begin to tell the story of networks as they.

**Notes**

1. This is a shorter version of an essay that was first published in Fibrebration 5 (2005), http://journal.

2. Over the past two years there has been a proliferation of magazines, journals and mailing lists exploring the theme of precarity and the associated problematic of labour organisation. Among these are Chainworkers, Mute, Multitudes, republikat, ephemera, European Journal of Higher Education, Derive Approdi, and aut-op-sy.

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

4. 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 within the exception to which policy-making and academic research on the creative industries. A recent issue of The International Journal of Cultural Policy, edited by David Hosmondayl 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).

**Sites**


*See the following for more information on these sites.*

**References**


Holmes, Brian. *‘The Spaces of a Cultural Question. An Email Interview with Brian Holmes by Marion von Osten*, *republikat* (April, 2004), http://www.republikat.net/dokumente/holmes_text.html.


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