

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

## Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter

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 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 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 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).<sup>1</sup> 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, 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 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

Drawings from:  
Work  
(Thirty-two Post  
Office Drawings)  
by Stuart Murray  
Glasgow 2004

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.

## 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 Moulrier-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, Moulrier-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; Parrenäs, 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 coordination 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 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.

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.



## 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 9/11, 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 9/11 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-9/11 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* understandably 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

### 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.

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 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-9/11 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. 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.

### 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?

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

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.

## 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 productivity 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".

## Notes

- \* This is a shorter version of an essay that was first published in *FibreCulture Journal* 5 (2005), [http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/neilson\\_rossiter.html](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/neilson_rossiter.html).
- 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*.
- 2. 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).
- 3. 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).

## Sites

aut-op-sy mailing list  
<https://lists.resist.ca/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/aut-op-sy/>  
 Chainworkers,  
<http://www.chainworkers.org/dev>  
 Derive Approdi, <http://www.deriveapprodi.org/DE-BUG: The Online Magazine of the South Bay>,  
<http://www.siliconvalleydebug.org/>  
 Dutch labour market reforms,  
<http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/1999/01/feature/nl9901117f.html>  
*ephemera: theory & politics in organization*,  
<http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/4-3/4-3index.htm>  
 EuroMayDay 2004 (Milan and Barcelona),  
<http://www.euromayday.org/>  
 EuroMayDay2005 (in seventeen European cities),  
<http://www.euromayday.org/index.php>  
*European Journal of Higher Arts Education*,  
<http://www.ejhae.elia-artschools.org/Issue2/en.htm>  
 Flexicurity,  
<http://www.chainworkers.org/dev/node/view/102>  
*Greenpepper Magazine*,  
<http://www.greenpeppermagazine.org/process/tiki-index.php?page=Precarity+%3A+Contents+Page>  
 Incommunicado, <http://incommunicado.info/>  
 Intermittents du Spectacle,  
<http://www.intermittents-danger.fr/fm/>  
 International Meeting of the Precariat (Berlin, January 2005),  
<http://www.globalproject.info/art-3264.html>  
 Molleindustria, <http://www.molleindustria.it/>  
 multitudes,  
[http://multitudes.samizdat.net/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=458](http://multitudes.samizdat.net/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=458)  
*Mute Magazine*,  
<http://www.metamute.com/look/issue.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=1&NrIssue=29>  
*Organizing the Unorganizable*, (dir. Florian Schneider, 2004),  
<http://kein.tv/>  
 Precarias alla Deriva,  
<http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias.htm>  
*republicart*,  
<http://www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/index.htm>  
 Precar Forum (Amsterdam, February 2005),  
<http://precarforum.nl/ENG/index.html>  
 Precarity Ping Pong (London, October 2004),  
<http://greenpeppermagazine.org/pingPong.html>  
 San Precario, <http://www.sanprecario.info/>

## References

- Anderson, Bridget. *Doing the Dirty Work: The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2000).
- Arrighi, Giovanni. 'Hegemony Unravelling, Part 1', *New Left Review* 32 (2005a): 23-80.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Hegemony Unravelling, Part 2', *New Left Review* 33 (2005b): 81-116.
- Bove, Arianna; Empson, Erik; Lovink, Geert; Schneider, Florian; Zehle, Soenke. (eds) *Makeworlds Paper* 3, 11 September (2003), <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/2>.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).
- Cooper, Melinda. 'On the Brink: From Mutual Deterrence to Uncontrollable War', *Contretemps* 4 (September, 2004): 2-18.
- Foti, Alex. 'Precarity and N/european Identity. Interview with Merjin Oudenampsen and Gavin Sullivan', *Greenpepper* (2004), [http://www.black-international-cinema.com/BIC05/XX.BIC2005/HTML/articles/article\\_08.htm](http://www.black-international-cinema.com/BIC05/XX.BIC2005/HTML/articles/article_08.htm).
- Gill, Rosalind. 'Cool, Creative and Egalitarian? Exploring Gender in Project-based New Media Work', *Information, Communication & Society* 5.1 (2002): 70-89.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
- Harvey, David. *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- Hesmondhalgh, David and Pratt, Andy C. (eds) 'Special issue: The Cultural Industries and Cultural Policy', *The International Journal of Cultural Policy* 11.1 (2005).
- Holmes, Brian. 'The Spaces of a Cultural Question. An Email Interview with Brian Holmes by Marion von Osten', *republicart* (April, 2004), [http://www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/holmes-osten01\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/holmes-osten01_en.htm).
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- Lovink, Geert. *My First Recession: Critical Internet Culture in Transition* (Rotterdam: V2\_/NAi Publishers, 2003).
- Marazzi, Christian. *Il posto dei calzini. La svolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti sulla politica* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999).
- Martin, Randy. *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).
- Mezzadra, Sandro. *Diritto di fuga: Migrazioni, cittadinanza, globalizzazione* (Verona: ombre corte, 2001).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Capitalismo, migrazioni e lotte sociali. Appunti per una teoria dell'autonomia delle migrazioni', in Sandro Mezzadra (ed.) *I confini della liberta: Per un'analisi politica delle migrazioni contemporanee* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2004).
- Montag, Warren. 'The Pressure of the Street: Habermas's Fear of the Masses', in Mike Hill and Warren Montag (eds) *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere* (New York: Verso, 2000), 132-145.
- Moulier-Boutang, Yann. *De l'esclavage au salariat. Économie historique du salariat bridé* (Paris: PUF, 1998).
- Napoleoni, Loretta. *Modern Jihad: Tracing the Dollars behind the Terror Networks* (London: Pluto, 2003).
- Neilson, Brett. 'The Market and the Police: Finance Capital in Permanent Global War', in Jon Solomon and Naoki Sakai (eds) *Traces 4*, Special issue on 'Addressing the Multitude of Foreigners' (forthcoming).
- Nowotny, Stefan. 'Clandestine Publics', *republicart* (March, 2005), [http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/nowotny05\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/nowotny05_en.htm).
- O'Regan, Tom; Gibson, Lisanne and Jeffcutt, Paul. (eds) *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy* 112 (2004).
- Parrenâs, Rachel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- Ross, Andrew. *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).
- Virno, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext[e], 2004a).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Motto di spirito e azione innovativa', *Forme di Vita* 2 & 3 (2004b): 11-36.
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). *Creative Industries and Development, Eleventh Session*, São Paulo, 13-18 June (2004), [http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/tdxibpd13\\_en.pdf](http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/tdxibpd13_en.pdf).

