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Knowledge production and new forms of political action

The experience of the intermittent workers in France

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> *We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate colour and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name. So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility.*
> Donna Haraway[1]

What is an intermittent worker of the spectacle? "Manufacturing the sensory", an intermittent worker of the spectacle is a wage laborer discontinuously employed by multiple employers at rates that vary according to the projects and the employers. Since the

sixties, these wage laborers who are "not like the others" have benefited from an "exceptional" regime of unemployment compensation, in the sense that the relative flexibility of the conditions of access to the right to unemployment compensation allowed a growing number of people to assure themselves of continuous income in a situation of radical discontinuity of employment. This "growing number" is conceived by power (that of the state, but also employers as well as some workers' unions) as "supernumerary", a number that exceeds the "normal" equilibrium of the market between the supply and demand of cultural goods (but we should speak instead of the goods produced by the "spectacular industry" [*industrie du spectaculaire*]). This is a comforting vision for the producers of "economic truths". The "supernumerary" has a cost: the deficit in unemployment insurance funding. The challenge to their specific regime of unemployment compensation already loomed as a real threat, but this is only the mark of the reform protocol, out of which a movement of great breadth has arisen. Its strength derives from its duration and from the fact that it has taken the organizational form of coordination, which is quite distinct from that of hierarchical organizational structures.2 Its strength also derives from the fact that it has taken into account the multiple subjectivities that compose it. Far from constituting a homogeneity from the viewpoint of labor skills, competences and practices, intermittent work [*intermittence*] covers a vast field, from machinists to composers, from directors to administrators, etc. Here we certainly find the characteristics of the immaterial worker of which Hardt and Negri speak, but the modes of existence, the life trajectories, labor practices, sensibilities and subjectivities implicated in the process of manufacturing "immaterial" good are heterogeneous. This is why the constitution of an "us" is not given; it is instead a problematic and passionate construction.

More than just the imbrication of time of life and labor time, intermittent work can be conceived as a "borderland" between employment and unemployment, a site beyond employment and unemployment from which to interrogate the meaning as well as the contents of labor—a borderland as a space for experimenting with forms of life that feed on the hybridization of space-time inside/outside of employment.[3] The supernumerary is thus the expression of flight from "normal" work, whose contents and meaning appear less and less obvious to us, toward the "borderlands", since it is not only a matter of fleeing from wage-earning but also of engagement in the search for "meaning", engagement in a becoming-other of the self and of what one makes. But the history of the movement of intermittent workers is also one of permanent "expertise", which inspires a reflection on the politics of knowledge and poses the relationship between minoritarian knowledges and majoritarian knowledges as a problem.[4]

If I refer to this experience of the movement, it is because it somehow constitutes the site of a singular assemblage between the problematic of "minoritarian knowledges" or the politics of knowledge and the issue of the "continuity of income" in the discontinuity of employment, or rather, another way of thinking labor, activity and the multiple spaces of life. This assemblage passes by way of the very particular step that this movement took from the very first days of its constitution. To try to sum up this step in a few words, I draw upon two major titles of its initiatives: "We have read the protocol" and "We have a proposition to make you". The reform protocol is read collectively, as all the reports of the "experts" will later be, and confronted with the "employment practices" and "labor practices" of the ones and the others in order to determine the consequences of its application. The instituted

truth-knowledge that makes up the law is confronted with the knowledges of those who have experience. By a process of sharing in common [*mise en commun*] the experiences and competences of the greatest number, the reform protocol is criticized not only for the inequalities of treatment that it engenders and the exclusions that it produces, but also for its inadequacy to the concrete and quite heterogeneous employment and labor practices of which those concerned have knowledge acquired through their lived experience. To say the least, the result is disappointing: the reform does not bring about the hoped-for economies that have justified it. What is revealed is the political meaning of the economic reforms bearing the heading "it must be done": to bring about a refoundation of social policy. It no longer involves mechanisms [*dispositifs*] of income transfer but rather mechanisms of capitalization, according to a principle of individual insurance, that are intended to create the conditions for the existence of that economic and social regulator, the market. The old system of compensation, which limited the randomness inherent in discontinuous employment practices and assured a certain continuity of income each year, constituted a powerful tool by which flexibility could be reappropriated by intermittent workers as freely-chosen mobility; it constituted a tool of resistance to the processes of devalorization of labor and pauperization of workers, but it also freed them from the grip of employment and opened up other possibilities, other fabrics of the sensory and other temporalities as well. The experience of "expertise" within the movement of intermittent workers is very rich, and it allows the movement to shift the combat to the very terrain of the production of power-knowledge, to what Foucault calls the "regime of truth". Isabelle Stengers has emphasized the specific contribution of this movement: it is not merely a matter of laying claim to expertise, rather it is the fact of having revealed the logic of the reforms

imposed under the slogan “You are too numerous, it must be done”. The intermittent workers have revealed the bookkeeping logic on which neoliberal policies are based: fabricate deficits and use populations as adjustable variables. It appeared, then, that “the meaning of ‘it must be done’ [...] refers not to a necessity that everyone must recognize, but rather to a global operation of reassembly of the relations between the state and capitalism”.5

“We have a proposition to make you” is the second moment, the second stage of “expertise”: it involves not only saying “no” to reform, since it is not just the conservative defense of the past, but also the occasion to elaborate a “New Model” of unemployment compensation for wage laborers in discontinuous employment on the basis of a collectively constructed representation of “necessary conditions” so that labor practices and other forms of life—extracted from the constraints of employment flexibility—will be possible. Far from claiming universality, the “New Model” is intended as an appropriable “open base”, adaptable to the “local” criteria belonging to different practices. The battle for social rights, for the assurance of income continuity, here takes on the meaning of a battle to protect and even enlarge this borderland between employment and unemployment that is intermittent work. The New Model brings about a displacement of the logic of employment/unemployment. It foreshadows neither a total inside (permanent employment) nor a total outside (a universal dole). The New Model expresses neither the claim to permanent employment nor the claim to income, but rather guarantees the conditions for “making it”, for making something different, and making it differently. It displaces the centrality of labor, and a fortiori wage labor, without claiming to eliminate the class of wage-earners; it does so by destabilizing wage labor to the point that it can no longer be the “norm” that is imposed on everyone.

The New Model articulates an income of activity and social income conceived within a logic of insurance that is neither individual nor assistance-based [*assistencielle*] but rather mutualist. It utilizes the "inside" (cultural institutions and those of the market) and the "outside" (sites of experimentation outside the normalizing structures of aesthetics and cultural contents). In other words, this New Model is configured as a "necessary condition" for being able to "make it" and also to "make differently" the artistic creations that its own life extracts from employment time, from the caprices of the market and the rule of capital. It presents itself as a range of possibilities large enough that each person can choose her own forms of mobility and his own practices of activity.

Some researchers, myself among them, have joined the movement. We did not bring with us the idea of collective expertise; it was already there, constitutive of the movement. And our presence in the movement certainly cannot be defined by the figure that Foucault called the universal intellectual, "a master of truth and justice…the spokesman of the universal".6 There is something that "brings us together" as researchers with the intermittent workers of the spectacle, something that has to do in part with the "borderlands" (between one contract and another for those who are free-lance researchers, between teaching and research for the guaranteed researchers [*statutaires*], but even more the ones between disciplines, between the narrow walls of the universities and their outside), but above all it is the fact that the practices of the production of knowledge with which the intermittent workers are experimenting involve us directly as makers of "knowledges" and university professionals, most notably in the domain of the social sciences, and also as engaged intellectuals. In the experience of co-production our practices are transformed, our categories metamorphosed, our interpretive schemas altered. Furthermore,

what brings us together is the fact of knowing that an income is no guarantee that we can "make it" and "make it differently", knowing that we still need tools of production and distribution. What brings us together is also the fact that we are this figure of which Hardt and Negri speak, producers of knowledges, symbols, information, relations and culture—the fact that we can also be co-producers of the culture that we are contesting. And we are experimenting with the complex relationship between exploitation and subjection [*assujettissement*]. But what constitutes our common trait is the fact that in France, the producers of knowledges, symbols and information are all damnably white-faced.

On the basis of her experience as an ethnologist, Vinciane Despret writes the following: "Are not our categories, our problems, our history the things that make us describe others as those things describe us? It is not just a matter of breaking with some versions of the 'us', but with the very idea that we could, without constructing it, seek universality—a universality that is so much more suspect than history has taught us, that has regularly served to impose the point of view of the dominant groups [...] In place of abstract universality given as an a priori condition, we must substitute what feminists have called a 'concrete universality', made up of a multiplicity of viewpoints".7 The experience of co-production fits into this construction of local concrete universality. It implies the confrontation among multiple viewpoints, but also the mobilization of multiple and singular competences. It involves the invention of a tool for producing sharable knowledge. There is no diploma for such manufacturing, but in any case this operation is not transferable since it is constructed within a fold of local institutional and political history, and it must be conceived instead as an "open base".

Foucault spoke of a "specific intellectual" in opposition to the figure of the universal intellectual in order to account for "a new mode of the 'connection between theory and practice'".8 But in our experience, the new mode is also defined by the implied figures: what we could call in Foucault's terms specific intellectuals, but also "those concerned [*concernés*]". Far from being an acquisition, the production of "transversal links of one knowledge to another knowledge" between "specific intellectuals" and "those concerned" as experts—in the sense of "those who have experience"—is an everyday challenge: to avoid the risk of reverting to the figure of the "acknowledged expert" or worse, the "universal intellectual", as well as the risk of the romantic idealization of minorities or "those concerned". The risk of falling into a sort of "romantic" approach to the "margins" as exteriority is always great. But "[t]he margins," writes Rosi Braidotti, "are always within, inside a social space that is not smooth but multilinear, discontinuous and pitted everywhere".9 There is always a risk of falling into a no less romantic, naturalizing/essentializing approach to "those concerned" that idealizes the knowledge they bear as "pure", "naïve", "bare", or "independent", as if those knowledges were not already traversed by representations and visions, as if seeing did not require learning to see, and indeed "learning to see with the help of others without claiming to see for them". From the critical perspective of hegemonic knowledge and its pretense of objectivity, the risk of falling either into absolute relativism or into a position that, by idealizing the knowledge of "those concerned", ends up in an approach which imagines that only identity will produce science is great.

The feminist epistemologists, scientists and philosophers have posed the objectivity and universality of knowledge as a problem, and they have also shown that there is no *becoming-woman of*

intellectual labor but rather many *becomings-feminist*: it is not "as women" that scientists have produced other modes of production of knowledge and other knowledges, since it is not identity that produces science but rather critical positioning, as Donna Haraway has shown. "[F]eminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*",10 but the knowledges of "those concerned" are not immediately situated knowledges. "Situated knowledge", as Beatriz Preciado remarks in rereading Haraway, "does not constitute a transgression coming from the margins of normality".11 "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. In this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see."12 "I am arguing", Haraway adds, "for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims."13 "Situated knowledges act as practices of subaltern objectivity in the face of universal scientific authorities and cultural relativisms", writes Beatriz Preciado. Such objectivity is a practice that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, networks of relations that cover the world and include the ability to partially translate knowledges between communities that are themselves very different and differentiated in terms of power, as Haraway says.

Hence it is impossible to recompose a "universal" subject, either out of a paradigmatic figure (the precarious worker or the cognitive worker, for example) or out of a figure that incarnates the tendency (Hardt and Negri's immaterial worker), but this impossibility of totalizing the critique, as Preciado emphasizes, "does not imply the impossibility of local alliance among multiplicities; on the contrary, a minor alliance only exists in the multiplicity of enunciation as a cross-section of differences [...] It is a matter of inventing

'relational politics', strategies of political intersection that challenge the spaces at the 'intersection of oppressions'". The politics of situated knowledges can then be conceived as the politics of knowledges that connect differences, that establish rhizomatic alliances in discontinuity and not in consensus, a politics made up of networks of differential positionings, to use Chela Sandoval's terms.14 The question of how to make the concept of the multitude "operative in the field" can only find satisfactory answers by planting itself firmly in the analysis of the terrain on which the connections are in the process of being made, the possible connections that imply not homogeneity but rather multiple assemblages—by "manufacturing intelligence of the heterogeneous as heterogeneous, in which each term is an opportunity for others to experiment a bit differently with their positions".15 We have experimented with such a politics in this local experience, which has allowed us to produce a knowledge that will only ever be partial, and its partiality will make it objective. We have not discovered a "truth", but instead revealed the rules according to which the knowledges that institute the law, in their partiality, can be set up as truth. The political dimension of this movement is measured less by what it has won or lost in the short term than by the displacements that it brings about and the metamorphoses that the collective experience has produced in each of us.

This text version differs in a number of passages from the French, Spanish, and German versions published on this website; it has originally been translated under the title „The intermittents workers of the spectacle. The Politics of Situated Knowledges: an experience in a social movement" (editorial note).

1 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", p.190.

2 Unlike other organizations born in the nineties and after 2000 which do not have hierarchical structures, this form of coordination no longer has official spokespeople, everybody can be a spokesperson.

3 In issue 17 of *Multitudes* we dedicated a dossier to *Intermittence dans tous ses états* [Intermittent work in all its states].

4 A dossier in issue 20 of *Multitudes* was dedicated to the question of expertise.

5 Stengers, "Le défi de la production de l'intelligence collective", interview with Andrée Bergeron, in *Multitudes* 20 (2005).

6 Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), trans. Colin Gordeon, p.126.

7 Despret, *Quand le loup habitera avec l'agneau* (Paris: Les empêcheurs en rond, 2002), p.194.

8 Foucault, "Truth and Power", p.126.

9 Braidotti, "L'Europe peut-elle nous faire rêver?", interview with Antonella Corsani, in *Multitudes* 14, p.97.

10 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", p.188.

11 Preciado, op. cit.

12 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", p.190.

13 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", p.195.

14 See Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

15 Pignarre and Stengers, *La sorcellerie capitaliste*, p.152.