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Precari-Us?

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Few could be unaware that an increasing proportion of the workforce is engaged in intermittent or irregular work. But I'd like to set aside for the moment the weight and scope of the evidentiary, those well-rehearsed findings that confirm beyond doubt the discovery and currency of precariousness and which render the axiomatic terrain upon which such facts are discovered beyond reproach. Instead, I would like to explore something of the grammar at work in these discussions. As a noun, 'precariousness' is both more unwieldy and indeterminate than most. If it is possible to say anything for certain about precariousness, it is that it teeters. This is to begin by emphasising some of the tensions that shadow much of the discussion about precarious labour. Some of those tensions can be located under various, provisional headings which bracket the oscillation between regulation and deregulation, organisation and dissemination, homogenous and concrete time, work and life.

There are notable instances of this: consider recent research commissioned by Australia's foremost trade union body, the ACTU, into what they call 'non-standard' forms of work. As reported, most of those surveyed said they would like 'more work.' It is not clear to what extent that answer was shaped by the research, that is: by the ACTU's persistent arguments for a return to 'standard hours,' re-regulation, or their more general regard for

Fordism as the golden age of social democracy and union organisation. 'Non-standard work' has mostly been viewed by unions as a threat, not only to working conditions but, principally, to the continuing existence of the unions themselves.

But what is clear is that the flight from 'standard hours' was not precipitated by employers but rather by workers seeking less time at work. This flight coincided with the first wave of an exit from unions. What the Italian Workerists dubbed 'the refusal of work' in the late 1970s had its anglophone counterpart in the figure of the 'slacker'. This predated the 'flexiblisation' of employment that took hold in the 1980s. The failure of this oppositional strategy nevertheless provoked what Andrew Ross has called the 'industrialisation of bohemia'. Given that capitalism persisted, the flight from Fordist regularity and full time work can be said to have necessitated the innovation and extension of capitalist exploitation much like gentrification has followed university students around suburbs and de-industrialising areas since the 1970s.

The search for a life outside work tended to reduce into an escape from the factory and its particular forms of discipline. And so, perhaps paradoxically, this flight triggered an indistinction between work and life commensurate with the movement of exploitation into newer areas. This is why the answer of 'more work' now presents itself so often as the horizon of an imaginable solution to the problem of impoverishment and financial instability not more money or more life outside work, but more work.

Take the distinction between work-time and leisure-time. These categories become formalised with Fordism, its temporal rhythm as measured out by the wage, clock and assembly line, and distinguished by a proportionality and particular division of times,

as in the eight hour day and the five day week. Here, leisure-time bears a determined relationship to work — as the trade-off for the mind-numbing tedium of the assembly line, as rejuvenation, and as temporary respite from the mind-body split that line-work enforces. Yet leisure time was, still, substantively a time of not-work.

By comparison, while the perpetually irregular work of post-Fordism might, though not necessarily, decrease the actual amount of time spent doing paid work, it nevertheless enjoins the post-Fordist worker to be continually available for such work, to regard life outside waged work as a time of preparation for and readiness to work. Schematically put: whereas Fordism sought to cretinise, to sever the brains of workers from their bodies so as to assign thought, knowledge, planning and control to management, post-Fordist capitalism might by contrast be characterised — in Foucault's terms — as the imprisonment of the body by the soul. Hence the utility of desire, knowledge, and sociality in post-Fordism.

The long, Protestant history of assuming work as an ethical or moral imperative returns in the not-always secular injunction to treat one's self as a commodity both during and outside actual work time. One can always try to defer the ensuing panic and anxiety with pharmacology, as Franco Berardi argues. But something might also be said here about that other 'opiate,' the parallel rise of an enterprising, evangelical Christianity; not to mention attempts to freeze contingency in communitarianism, of one variant or another. The precariousness of life — experienced all the more insistently because life depends on paid work — tends to close the etymological distance between prayer (precor) and the precarious (precarius).

Precarious Subjects

The term 'Precarity' might have replaced 'precariousness' with the advantage of a prompt neologism; yet both continue to be burdened by a normative bias which seeks guarantees in terms that are often neither plausible nor desirable. Precariousness is mostly rendered in negative terms, as the imperative to move from irregularity to regularity, or from abnormality to normality. That normative burden is conspicuous in the grammatical development from adjective to noun: precarious to precariousness, condition to name.

Yet, capitalism is perpetually in crisis. Capital is precarious, and normally so. Stability here has always entailed formalising relative advantages between workers, either displacing crises onto the less privileged, or deferring the effects of those crises through debt. Moreover, what becomes apparent in discussions on precariousness is that warranties are often sought, even by quite different approaches, in the juridical realm. The law becomes the secularised language of prayer against contingency. This assumes a distinction between law and economy that is certainly no longer, if it ever was, all that plausible. It is not clear, therefore, whether the motif of precariousness works to simply entice a desire for its opposite, security, regardless if this is presented as a return to a time in which security apparently reigned or as a future newly immunised against precariousness.

There are nationalist denominations. Precarity (or precarité), in its current expression, emerged in French sociology and its attempts to grasp the convergence of struggles by unemployed and intermittent workers in the late 1990s. Most prominently, Bourdieu was among those who raised the issue of a diffuse precarité as an argument for the strengthening of the Nation State

against this, as well as the globalisation that was said to have produced it. In its far less nationalist versions, the discussion on precarity is marked sometimes ambivalently and not always explicitly by the presentation of a hoped-for means of resistance, if not revolution. A renewed focus on changing forms of class composition or new subjectivities may have brought with it an irreversible and overdue shift in perspective and vocabulary. But that shift has not in all cases disturbed the structural assumptions of an orthodox Marxism in the assertion of a newer, therefore more adequate, vanguard. Names confer identity as if positing an unconditional presupposition. Like all such assertions, it is not simply the declaration that one has discovered the path to a different future in an existing identity that remains questionable. More problematically, such declarations are invariably the expression and reproduction of a hierarchy of value in relation to others.

For instance, if Lenin's Party, defined as the figure of the 'revolutionary intellectual', paid homage to the mind-body split of Fordism and Taylorism (where others were either cast as a 'mass' or, where actively oppositional, 'counterrevolutionaries'), to what extent has the discussion on precarious labour avoided a similar duplication of segmentation and conformism? Or, to put the question in classical Marxist terms: to what extent can an identity which is immanent to capitalism (whether 'working class' or 'multitude') be expected to abolish capitalism, and therefore its very existence and identity? Does a politics which takes subjectivity as its question and answer reproduce a politics as the idealised image of such? A recourse to an Enlightenment Subject replete with the stratifications which presuppose it, and ledgered according to its current values (or valuations), not least among these being the distinction between paid and unpaid labour.

Let me put still this another way: the discussion of the precarious conditions of 'creative labour' and the 'industrialisation of bohemia' tends to restage a manoeuvre found in Puccini's opera La Boheme. Here, a bunch of guys (a poet, philosopher, artist and musician) suffer for their art in their garret. But it is the character of Mimi the seamstress who talks of fripperies rather than art who furnishes Puccini and our creative heroes with the final tragedy with which to exalt that art as suffering and through opera. The figure of the artist (or 'creative labourer') may well circulate, in some instances, as the exemplary figure of the post-Fordist worker precarious, immaterial and so on but this requires a moment in which the precarious conditions of others are declared to be a result of their 'invisibility' or 'exclusion'.

For what might turn out to have been the briefest of political moments, the exemplary figure of precariousness was that of undocumented migrant workers, without citizenship but nevertheless inside national economic space, and precarious in more senses than might be indicated by other uses of the word. And, far from arriving with the emergence of newer industries or subjectivities, precarious work has been a more or less constant feature of domestic work, retail, 'hospitality,' agriculture, sex work and the building industry, as well as sharply inflecting the temporal and financial arrangements which come into play in the navigation of child-rearing and paid work for many women. But rather than shaking assertions that the 'precariat' is a recent phenomenon, through the declaration that such work was previously 'invisible', the apprehension of migrant, 'Third World' and domestic labour seems to have become the pretext for calls for the reconstruction of the plane of visibility (of juridical recognition and mediation) and the eventual circulation and elevation of the cultural-artistic (and cognitive) worker as its paradigmatic expression. The strategy of

exodus (of migration) has been translated into the thematics of inclusion, visibility and recognition.

On a global scale and in its privatised and/or unpaid versions, precarity is and has always been the standard experience of work in capitalism. When one has no other means to live than the ability to labour or even more precariously, since it privatises a relation of dependency to reproduce and 'humanise' the labour publicly tendered by another, life becomes contingent on capital and therefore precarious.

The experience of regular, full-time, long-term employment which characterised the most visible, mediated aspects of Fordism is an exception in capitalist history. That presupposed vast amounts of unpaid domestic labour by women and hyper-exploited labour in the colonies. This labour also underpinned the smooth distinction between work and leisure for the Fordist factory worker. The enclosures and looting of what was once contained as the Third World and the affective, unpaid labour of women allowed for the consumerist, affective 'humanisation' and protectionism of what was always a small part of the Fordist working class. A comparably privileged worker who was nonetheless elevated to the exemplary protagonist of class struggle by way of vanguardist reckonings. Those reckonings tended to parallel the valuations of bodies by capital, as reflected in the wage. The 'lower end' of the (global) labour market and divisions of labour impoverishment, destitution or a privatised precariousness were accounted for, as an inherent attribute of skin colour and sex, as natural. In many respects, then, what is registered as the recent rise of precarity is actually its discovery among those who had not expected it by virtue of the apparently inherent and eternal (perhaps biological) relation between the characteristics of their bodies and their possible monetary valuation a sense of worth verified by the demarcations

of the wage (paid and unpaid) and in the stratification of wage levels.

Biopolitical Arithmetic

To be sure, there are important reasons to continue a discussion of precarious labour and precarity, of how changes to work-time become diffused as a disposition. Precarity is a particularly useful way to open a discussion on the no longer punctual dimensions of the encounter between worker and employer, and how this gives rise to a generalised indistinction between the labour market, self, relationships and life.

The more interesting aspect of this discussion is the connection made between the uncertainty of making a living and therefore the uncertainty of life that is thereby produced in its grimly mundane as well as horrific aspects: impoverishment, as both persistent threat and circumstance; the 'war on terror'; the internment camps; 'humanitarian intervention', and so on. In this, the topic of biopolitics re-emerges with some urgency or rather this urgency becomes more tangible for that privileged minority of workers (or 'professionals') who were previously unfamiliar with its full force. Impoverishment and war pronounce austere verdicts upon lives reckoned as interchangeable and therefore at risk of being declared superfluous. What does it means to insist here, against its capitalist calculations, on the 'value of life'?

This raises numerous questions. What are the intersections between economic and political-ethical values? Does value have a measure, a standard by which all values (lives) are calculated and related? Transformed into organisational questions: how feasible is it to use precarity as a means for alliances or coalition-building

without effacing the differences between Mimi and the Philosopher, or indeed reproducing the hierarchy between them? Is it in the best interests for the maquiladora worker to ally herself with the fashion designer? Such questions cannot be answered abstractly. But there are two, perhaps difficult and irresolvable questions that might be still be posed.

First, what are the specific modes of exploitation of particular kinds of work? If the exploitation and circulation of 'cognitive' or 'creative labour' consists, as Maurizio Lazzarato argues, in the injunction to 'be active, to communicate, to relate to others' and to 'become subjects', then how does this shape their interactions with others, for better or worse? How does the fast food 'chainworker', who is compelled to be affective, compliant, and routinised not assume such a role in relation to a software programming 'brainworker', whose habitual forms of exploitation oblige opinion, innovation and self-management? How is it possible for the latter to avoid assuming for themselves the specialised role of mediator let alone preening themselves in the cognitariat's mirror as the subject, actor or 'activist' of politics in this relationship? To what extent do the performative imperatives of artistic-cultural exploitation (visibility, recognition, authorship) foreclose the option of clandestinity which remains an imperative for the survival of many undocumented migrants and workers in the informal economy?

Secondly, why exactly is it important to search for a device by which to unify workers however plurally that unity is configured? Leaving aside the question of particular struggles say, along specific production chains it is not all that clear what the benefits might be of insisting that precarity can function as this device for recomposing what was in any case the fictitious and highly contested unity of 'the working class'. To be sure, that figure is

being challenged by that of 'the multitude', but what is the specific nature of this challenge?

Ellen Rooney once noted that pluralism is a deeper form of conformism: while it allows for a diversity of content, conflict over the formal procedures which govern interaction are off-limits, as is the power of those in whose image and interest those rules of interaction are constituted. Often, this arises because the procedures established for interaction and the presentation of any resulting 'unity' are so habitual that they recede beyond view. Those who raise problems with them therefore tend to be regarded as the sources of conflict if not the architects of a fatal disunity of the class. A familiar, if receding, example: sexism is confined to being a 'women's issue', among a plurality of 'issues,' but it cannot disrupt the *form* of politics.

What then is the arithmetic of biopolitics emerging from the destitution of its Fordist forms? If Fordist political forms consecrated segmentations that were said to inhere, naturally, in the difference of bodies, then what is post-Fordism's arithmetic? Post-Fordism dreams of the global community of 'human capital', where differences are either marketable or reckoned as impediments to the free flow of 'humanity' as or rather for capital. In short, political pluralism is the idealised version of the post-Fordist market.

It might be useful here to specify that commodification does not consist in the acts of buying and selling which obviously predate capitalism. Rather, commodification means the application of a universal standard of measure that relates and reduces qualitative differences of bodies, actions, work according to the abstract measure of money. Abstract equivalence, without its idyllic depictions, presupposes and produces hierarchy, exploitation and

violence. Formally, which is to say juridically: neither poor nor rich are allowed to sleep under bridges.

What does it mean, then, to argue that the conditions of precarious workers might be served by a more adequate codification of rights? It does not, I think, mean that our conditions will improve or, rather, be guaranteed by such. Proposals for 'global citizenship' by Negri and Hardt are predated by the global reach of a militaristic humanitarianism that has already defined its meaning of the convergence between 'human rights' and supra-national force. Similarly, a 'basic income' has already been shown, in the places it exists such as Australia, to be contingent upon and constitutive of intermittent engagements with waged work, if not forced labour, as in work-for-the-dole schemes. The latter policy was applied to unemployed indigenous people before it became a recent measure against the unemployed generally. Basic incomes do not suspend the injunction to work often in low paid, casual or informal jobs; they are deliberately confined to levels which provide for a bare life but not for a livelihood. The introduction of work-for-the-dole schemes indicate that, where 'human capital' does not flow freely as such, policy (and pluralism) will resort to direct coercion, cancelling the formally voluntary contract of wage labour. The introduction of the work-for-the-dole scheme for indigenous people in Australia followed on the collapse in their employment rates after the introduction of 'equal pay' laws. Their 'failure to circulate' was explained as an inherent, often biological, attribute (chiefly as laziness) and, therefore, the resort to forced labour was rendered permissible by those politicians who most loudly proclaimed their commitment to multiculturalism and the reconciliation of indigenous and 'settler' Australians.

So, how might it be possible to disassociate the value of life from the values of capital? Or, with regard to the relation between a

globalised nationalism and aspirations for supra-national arrangements: how to sever the various daily struggles against precariousness from the enticements of a global security-state? Rights are not something one possesses even if many of us are reputed, by correlation, to possess our own labour in the form of an increasingly self-managed or self-employed exploitation. Rights, like power, are *exercised*, in practice and by bodies. As juridical codes, they are both bestowed and denied by the state, at its discretion. There are no guarantees and there will always be a struggle to exercise particular rights, irrespective of whether they are codified in law. But, as a strategy, the path of rights means praying that the law or state might distribute rights and entrusting it with the authority and force to deny them.

That said, precarity might well have us teetering, it might even do so evocatively, for better and often worse, praying for guarantees and, at times, shields that often turn out to be fortresses. But it is yet to dispense with, for all its normative expressions, a relationship to the adjective: to movement, however uncertain. 'Precarious' is as much a description of patterns of worktime as it is the description, experience, hopes and fears of a faltering movement in more senses than one, and possibly since encountering the limits of the anti-summit protests. This raises the risk of movements that become trapped in communitarian fears or in dreams of a final end to risk in the supposedly secure embrace of global juridical recognition. Yet, it also makes clear that a different future, by definition, can only be constructed precariously, without firm grounds for doing so, without the measure of a general rule, and with questions that should, often, shake us particularly what 'us' might mean.