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Spectacle Inside the State and Out

GlobalProject / Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires d'Ile de France

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The strength of a political movement is found not only in its ability to reach a concrete objective. These kinds of successes depend mostly on the economy of power relations. The strength of a movement reveals itself more in its potential for raising new questions and providing new answers. And this much is certain: the battles of the precariously employed French cultural workers have raised new questions demanding new answers.[1]

A new regulation has been in effect in France since 1 January 2004. The agreement provides for the cancellation or reduction of the claims of hundreds of thousands of unemployed people. Those that this applies to are the so-called *intermittents du spectacle*, "independent" cultural workers. Prior to this there was a separate regulation for them, the so-called "cultural exception". Under this regulation, cultural workers in between two productions with no income were paid from the unemployment fund – under the condition (which was already difficult for many to fulfill) that they could prove 507 hours of working time for a total of twelve months. This resulted in a twelve-month claim to unemployment

benefits. However, since businesses and three unions signed the "Protocol Unedic" on a new regulation of unemployment insurance last summer, the regulation above is no longer valid since the beginning of this year. Now the same number of working hours has to be proven in eleven months, and then unemployment benefits can only be claimed for eight months. This means that 35% of those who could previously claim benefits are no longer entitled to them.

"We are performers, interpreters, technicians. We are involved in the production of theater plays, dance and circus performances, concerts, records, documentary and feature films, TV shows, Reality-TV, the evening news and advertising. We are behind the camera and in front of it, on stage and backstage, we are on the street, in classrooms, prisons and hospitals. The structures we work in range from non-profit projects to entertainment corporations listed on the stockmarket. As participants in both art and industry, we are subject to a double flexibility: flexible working hours and flexible wages. The regulation on the insurance and unemployment of the Intermittents du spectacle originally arose from the need to secure a continuous income and cushion the discontinuity of employment situations. The regulation made it possible to flexibly arrange production and ensure the mobility of wage-dependent persons in between different projects, sectors and employments."[2]

And … action!

The Intermittents resisted with demonstrations and spectacular occupation and strike actions throughout the summer of 2003. Numerous cultural events had to be canceled or were turned into discussion forums; one evening, activists even succeeded in interrupting the broadcast of the evening news from the public

television channel France 2. Organized in local coordinations networked throughout the country, the Intermittents raise the question of precarious employment, but also beyond the realm of cultural production. Their battles are about more than just the demand for payment. They attack not only a legal or economic relationship of subordination with regards to a public or private employer. Instead, they show us that it is a matter of attacking the foundations of the production of public goods such as education and culture, along with the institutional procedures and utilization technologies that go with them: the funding of culture, the distribution of access rights, and finally the production of consumer-subjectivities through schools, cultural industries and media.

"For us, this conflict led to a more in-depth reflection about our professions. In an era when the utilization of labor is increasingly based on individuals bringing themselves into their work with all their subjective resources, and in which the space afforded to this subjectivity is increasingly limited and formatted, this battle represents an act of resistance: we need to reappropriate the sense of our work at a personal and collective level."

The cultural and communication industries are not just new fields of capitalist accumulation, but they also produce desires, beliefs and emotions in the control societies. Here the Intermittents occupy a nexus between these industries, the production of the public sphere and the consumers of the various cultural industries. In principle, it is no longer possible to speak of a "special position of culture": first of all, because cultural practices have long since become an integral component of capitalist production. Secondly, because the production of emotions precedes material production. The consumer-subjectivity produced through marketing, advertising, communication policies and artistic practice is a

fundamental precondition for the cultural industry, and yet it cannot be limited to utilization by the cultural industry. The unemployment "reform" with its implicit promotion of corporate art accelerates the standardization and norming of this generalization of cultural production and consumption.

"The new regulation only spares one category of wage-dependent persons, namely the group with regular contracts. Originally the point was to ensure a continuity of income in the fields, where the logic of profits does not come first. Now only the most profitable companies – especially those in the audiovisual industry – are able to continue to profit from employees, who are under more pressure than ever to accept the 'contents' and working conditions of the proposed employment."

As both the actors in and those affected by this situation, the Intermittents raise the question of possibilities for escaping this capitalist occupation of the emotions and challenge us to more thoroughly examine contemporary forms of exploitation. As industrial capitalism appropriates natural raw materials and labor power in order to exploit them for the production of material goods, contemporary capitalism seizes cultural and artistic resources to subordinate them to the logic of profit – yet without bearing the costs of production.

"As an assault on collective rights, this 'reform' introduces a specific idea of the cultural exception: a showcase art with its especially promoted exemplary projects on the one hand and an industry of standardized culture on the other, which is capable of competing in the world market."

For a Generalization of the "Cultural Exception" …

In the course of the movement of the Intermittents, hotel and restaurant owners and merchants from Aix-en-Provence took legal action against unknown persons. The cancellation of the "festival d'art lyrique" by its director due to strikes by the Intermittents led to a 30% loss of profits for the local tourist industry. Together with the cultural and communications industries, the tourist industry is most desirous of cultural and artistic resources: of traditions, ways of living, rites, world views, as well as festivals, theater and art works of all kinds. The tourist industry colonizes public goods such as art works, architecture, landscapes or historical city centers, appropriates them at no cost and changes their status: from "human heritage" to the private inheritance of the industry and tourism. A walk through the historical city center of any European city suffices for us to understand how the transformation of the experience of time and space into commodity form is carried out. This is not only a tremendous reduction of the social public sphere to the coupled terms "provider" and "customer". In addition, a huge amount of labor is utilized without any financial compensation.

"In the strict perspective of accounting on which the new regulation is based, employment is the only basis for calculation; only the amount is paid that corresponds to the social security contribution. The portion of socially produced wealth that goes beyond this is not taken into consideration."

In principle, it is possible to advocate for social rights as cultural workers from two directions. One way would be to insist on the "cultural exception" in the sense of a professional privilege. Another would be to understand the insurance of artistic precariousness as an example for all those precariously employed, thus inscribing one's own, initially relatively limited demands into the battle for social rights.

"Is it not symptomatic that inroads are systematically being made in what could be a model for other categories of precariousness? Developing a model for unemployment insurance based on the reality of our practices is a basis for an open discussion of all the forms of reappropriation, of the dissemination and the spread of this battle into other areas."

The latter perspective additionally makes it possible to separate the general characteristics of post-fordist working conditions from the neo-liberal rhetoric of individualization, making this visible as a terrain of political battles.

"Our demands have nothing to do with a battle for privileges: flexibility and mobility, which are becoming a general requirement, must not lead to precariousness and misery. The development of a concept of unemployment compensation that recognizes the reality of our work, in other words the continuity of the activities and the discontinuity of payment, opens the door for forms of reappropriation and circulation."

… and the Appropriation of the Social

The battles of the Intermittents from last year call on us to raise new questions and to find new answers. The point is to subvert the subordination to the conditions of public or private "work", to propel the production of public goods outside the realm of their utilization by capital, and finally to decouple productive time from payment and thus secure access for everyone to segments of life not under surveillance. It is a matter of canceling out separations: between the invention and the reproduction of cultural goods, between producers and users, between experts and amateurs. The Intermittents' battle for social rights, specifically for a state-

guaranteed system of social security, is a precondition for this, precisely because it goes beyond this demand, when it rejects the reproduction of state-conform subjectivities, the division into "artists" and "other precariously employed persons" and conjoins the assurance of social rights with the battle for the social appropriation of public goods. The demands posed to the state thus serve to create a new public sphere: a sphere that is no longer determined by the state.

"Only collective social rights can guarantee the freedom of persons, also the continuity of work outside of periods of employment, also the realization of the most improbable projects, thus guaranteeing diversity and innovation. Dynamics, inventiveness and daring, which characterize artistic work, are based on the purposeful independence attained through interprofessional solidarity and the sustainment of acceptable living conditions."

[1] Revised and expanded translation of an article from *global*. Global Project – Paris: L'Europe est à nous, special edition for the ESF 2003. The Italian newspaper is linked with a transnational Internet project: www.globalproject.info.

[2] Quotations in italics are from the declarations of the *Intermittents et Précaires d'Ile de France*. Cf. *Jungle World* 26 and 32/2003.