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Info-Labour and Precarisation

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> "We have no future because our present is too volatile. The only possibility that remains is the management of risk. The spinning top of the scenarios of the present moment."
> (W. Gibson: *Pattern recognition*, tr. It. *L'accademia dei sogni*)

In February 2003 the American journalist Bob Herbert published in the New York Times the results of a cognitive survey on a sample of hundreds of unemployed youths in Chicago: none of their interviewees expected to find work the next few years, none of them expected to be able to rebel, or to set off large scale collective change. The general sense of the interviews was a sentiment of profound impotence. The perception of decline did not seem focused on politics, but on a deeper cause, the scenario of a social and psychical involution that seems to cancel every possibility of building alternatives.

The fragmentation of the present time is reversed in the implosion of the future. In *The Corrosion of Character: the Transformation of Work in Modern Capitalism* (Norton: 1998; tr. It. *L'Uomo*

Flessibile), Richard Sennett reacts to this existential condition of precariousness and fragmentation with nostalgia for a past epoch in which life was structured in relatively stable social roles, and time had enough linear consistency to construe paths of identity. "The arrow of time is broken: in an economy under constant restructuring that is based on the short-term and hates routine, definite trajectories no longer exist. People miss stable human relations and long term objectives." (R. Sennett: *The corrosion of character*)

But this nostalgia has no hold on present reality, and the attempts to reactivate the community remain artificial and sterile.

In the essay "Precari-us?", Angela Mitropoulos observes that precariousness is a precarious notion. This because it defines its object in an approximate manner, but also because from this notion derive paradoxical, self-contradictory, in other words precarious strategies. If we concentrate our critical attention on the precaricious character of job performance what would our proposed objective be? That of a stable job, guaranteed for life? Naturally no, this would be a cultural regression that would definitely subordinate the role of work. Some started to speak of Flexicurity to mean forms of wage independent of job performance. But we are still far from having a strategy of social recomposition of the labour movement to extricate ourselves from unlimited exploitation. We need to pick up again the thread of analysis of the social composition and decompositon if we want to distinguish possible lines of a process of recomposition to come.

In the 1970s the energy crisis, the consequent economic recession and finally the substitution of work with numerical machines resulted in the formation of a large number of people with no guarantees. Since then the question of the precarity became central

to social analysis, but also in the ambitions of the movement. We began by proposing to struggle for forms of guaranteed income, uncoupled from work, in order to face the fact that a large part of the young population had no prospect of guaranteed employment. The situation has changed since then, because what seemed a marginal and temporary condition has now become the prevalent form of labour relations. Precariousness is no longer a marginal and provisional characteristic, but it is the general form of the labour relation in a productive, digitalized sphere, reticular and recombinative.

The word 'precariat' generally stands for the area of work which is no longer definable by fixed rules relative to the labour relation, to salary and to the length of the working day. However if we analyse the past we see that these rules functioned only for a limited period in the history of relations between labour and capital. Only for a short period at the heart of the C20th, under the political pressures of unions and workers, in conditions of (almost) full employment and thanks to a role more or less strongly regulatory of the state in the economy, some limits to the natural violence of capitalist dynamics could be legally established. The legal obligations that in certain periods have protected society from the violence of capital were always founded on the existence of a relation of a force of a political and material kind (workers' violence against the violence of capital). Thanks to political force it became possible to affirm rights, establish laws and protect them as personal rights. With the decline in the political force of the workers' movement, the natural precariousness of labour relations in capitalism and its brutality have reemerged.

The new phenomenon is not the precarious character of the job market, but the technical and cultural conditions in which info-labour is made precarious.The technical conditions are those of

digital recombination of info-work in networks. The cultural conditions are those of the education of the masses and the expectations of consumption inherited from late C20th society and continuously fed by the entire apparatus of marketing and media communication.

If we analyse the first aspect, i.e. the technical transformations introduced by the digitalisation of the productive cycle, we see that the essential point is not the becoming precarious of the labour relation (which, after all, has always been precarious), but the dissolution of the person as active productive agent, as labour power. We have to look at the cyberspace of global production as an immense expanse of depersonalised human time.

Info-labour, the provision of time for the elaboration and the recombination of segments of info-commodities, is the extreme point of arrival of the process of the abstraction from concrete activities that Marx analysed as a tendency inscribed in the capital labour relation.

The process of abstraction of labour has progressively stripped labour time of every concrete and individual particularity. The atom of time of which Marx speaks is the minimal unit of productive labour. But in industrial production, abstract labour time was impersonated by a physical and juridcal bearer, embodied in a worker in flesh and bone, with a certified and political identity. Naturally capital did not purchase a personal disposition, but the time for which the workers were its bearers. But if capital wanted to dispose of the necessary time for its valorization, it was indispensable to hire a human being, to buy all of its time, and therefore needed to face up to the material needs and trade union and political demands of which the human was a bearer.

When we move onto the sphere of info-labour there is no longer a need to have bought over a person for eight hours a day indefinitely. Capital no longer recruits people, but buys packets of time, separated from their interchangeable and occasional bearers.

De-personalised time has become the real agent of the process of valorisation, and de-personalised time has no rights, nor any demands either. It can only be either available or unavailable, but the alternative is purely theoretical because the physical body despite not being a legally recognised person still has to buy his food and pay his rent.

The informatic procedures of the recombination of semiotic material have the effect of liquifying the 'objective' time necesssary to produce the info-commodity. All the time of life the human machines is there, pulsating and available, like a brain-sprawl in waiting. The extension of time is meticuously cellularised: cells of productive time can be mobilised in punctual, casual and fragmentary forms. The recombination of these fragments is automatically realised in the network. The mobile phone is the tool that makes possible the connection between the needs of semio-capital and the mobilisation of the living labour of cyber-space. The ringtone of the mobile phone calls the workers to reconnect their abstract time to the reticular flux.

It's a strange word that with which we identify the ideology prevalent in the posthuman transition to digital slavery: liberalism. Liberty is its foundational myth, but the liberty of whom? The liberty of capital, certainly. Capital must be absolutely free to expand in every corner of the world to find the fragment of human time available to be exploitated for the most miserable wage. But liberalism also predicates the liberty of the person. The juridical

person is free to express itself, to choose its representatives, to be entrepreneurial at the level of politics and the economy.

Very interesting, only that the person has disappeared, what is left is like an inert object, irrelevant and useless. The person is free, sure. But his time is enslaved. His liberty is a juridical fiction to which nothing in concrete daily life corresponds. If we consider the conditions in which the work of the majority of humanity, proletariat and cognitariat, is actually carried out in our time, if we examine the conditions the average wage globally, if we consider the current and now largely realised cancellation of previous labour rights, we can say with no rhetorical exaggeration that we live in a regime of slavery. The average salary on the global level is hardly sufficient to buy the indispensible means for the mere survival of a person whose time is at the service of capital. And people do not have any right over the time of which they are formally the proprietors, but effectively expropriated. That time does not really belong to them, because it is separated from the social existence of the people who who make it available to the recombinative cyberproductvie circuit. The time of work is fractalised, that is reduced to minimal and reassemblable fragments, and the fractualisation makes it possible for capital to constantly find the conditions of minimum salary.

How can we oppose the decimation of the working class and its systemic de-personalisation, the slavery that is affirmed as a mode of command of precarious and de-personalised work? This is the question that is posed with insistence by whoever still has a sense of human dignity. Nevertheless the answer does not come out because the form of resistance and of struggle that were efficacious in the C20th appear to no longer have the capacity to spread and consolidate themselves, nor consequently can they stop the absolutism of capital. An experience that derives from worker's

struggle in the last years, is that the struggle of precarious workers does not make a cycle. Fractalised work can also punctually rebel, but this does not set into motion any wave of struggle. The reason is easy to understand. In order for struggles to form a cycle there must be a spatial proximity of the bodies of labour and an existential temporal continuity. Without this proximity and this continuity, we lack the conditions for the cellularised bodies to become community. No wave can be created, because the workers do not share their existence in time, and behaviours can only become a wave when there is a continuous proximity in time that info-labour no longer allows.

(English Version from: http://www.generation-online.org/t/tinfolabour.htm