

Whose Precarity Is It Anyway?

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“The condition today described as that of the precarious worker is perhaps the fundamental reality of the proletariat. And the modes of existence of workers in 1830 are quite close to those of our temporary workers.”

– Jacques Ranciere, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth Century France*

During recent years in Italy and Spain, but now having spread more broadly, there has emerged a discussion about conditions of “precarity,” or precarious labor. Describing conditions of unstable, short term, flexible, and highly exploited labor, these discussions and the organizing based around them have sought to find new ways to contest forms of social domination and exploitation found within neoliberal capitalism.

These new conditions make it utterly clear that not just the usual, but also the more “radical,” methods of union organizing and political contestation, are no longer adequate to current conditions. As ever-increasing populations are involved in part-time, contract, and temp jobs — from 16.8% in the US to 46.1% in the Netherlands — creating methods of contestation that work from such positions is increasingly important. But concepts and methods of organizing inevitably need to be adapted as they move across time, space, and cultural context. In what ways might various ideas emerging around precarity be useful to radical political organizing in the US, or more broadly to other locations that do not share the same cultural and social history where these ideas have emerged?

Although the term precarity had been used previously, its contemporary usage derives from the efforts of the labor organizing and media activism collective Chainworkers, a Milano-based group which formed in 1999 to 2000. Their aim was to find ways to merge together the methods of IWW-inspired anarcho-syndicalist labor organizing and subvertising to find ways to contest forms of labor found within post-industrial capitalism. In conditions where work to a large extent no longer occurs primarily within centralized locations of production (such as factories), but is distributed across much larger geographic scales, forms of labor also increasingly differ from the physical production of goods, rather comprising activities often described as service sector jobs and involve communication, cultural interaction, advertising, working with data, and forms of emotional labor (work involving forms of care or creating a sense of well-being). This includes anything from airline flight attendants to advertising and media work, from sales jobs in countless chain stores to the expanding sector of lower level management.

These discussions are inspired by the legacy of workerist and autonomous politics in Italy originating from the 1960s and the 1970s involving groups such as Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua and involving figures like Sergio Bologna, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Mario Tronti, and Toni Negri. A key concept emerging from this milieu is that of class composition, which stresses how class relations and forms of power are not eternal but are constantly shifting fields of power that are determined not by the autonomous force of capital, but rather by capital’s needs to integrate forms of working class insurgency into its working. The refusal of work, seen in the US in the figure of the slacker or the dropout, was seen as a means to withdraw from capitalist relations and create autonomous forms of community and existence, or what is often referred to as exodus.

Given the drastic changes occurring within forms of work, it was necessary to radically update and reformulate labor organizing tactics to address them. While there have long existed many forms of contingent and precarious labor, such forms have become increasingly central in the continuing reproduction of capitalist domination, particularly since the neoliberal reaction to the social insurgencies of the 1960s and 70s which was followed by the capitalist counterattacks in the 1980s.

The Chainworkers in Italy thus moved their area of focus increasingly to the cultural and media spheres, trying to find bases of antagonism not primarily or even necessarily within the usually recognized locations of work, but through all the social fabric and areas where capitalist dynamics have seeped in. As the formerly existing space of the workplace was fractured by changes in the capitalist nature of work, organizing through cultural politics attempted to create a shared basis for a politics which was not based upon being located in the same physical workplace, but rather through the creation of shared positions and commonality in various cultural fields. Being located in the same workplace gave workers a common experience and space from which it was possible to organize, a space which no longer exists in the distributed forms of production and swing shifts that are more common in today's economy. Thus, the strategy shifts to using forms of cultural politics and symbolism to form a common space to organize from.

This is based on an understanding that cultural production is not an adjunct or addition to the "real work" of capitalist production but increasingly (particularly within highly industrialized areas) is the work that is a key component of it. And despite all the hoopla about the allegedly nonhierarchical and non-exploitative "new media" workplace that circulated during the 1990s and through the dot.com frenzy, the new boss was just as horrible as the old one, and even more so for those who didn't occupy the few relatively privileged positions in such workplaces that had become emblematic of this transformation (for an excellent account of this hype and its reality, see the book *No Collar* by Andrew Ross). Precarity in many ways is the inversion of the forms of struggle and exodus that emerged during the 1970s. Capital found ways to take people's desires for less work and for forms of flexible labor and arrangements, and turned them into increasingly uncertain conditions as social welfare provisions and neoliberal deregulation were brought into the Mediterranean countries.

Precarity as a concept was quite useful in creating an opening for repoliticizing everyday life and labor relations, which was needed in a period when the social energies unleashed by organizing around summit protests had clearly reached its limit. At its best, organizing around precarity became a method deploying a cultural politics based around a realization that the unstable and uncertain forms of social life that existed were closely connected by a series of new enclosures to the forms of debt and financial bondage being created: each imposition of structural adjustment programs by the International Monetary Fund in the so-called Third World is connected the dismantling of social services in the First, the enclosures of common lands is related to the increasing enclosure of people's time, energies, and creativity, and so forth.

This was accomplished through the development of an array of cultural symbols and actions, such as the imaginative figure of San Precario, which uses Catholic saint imagery to represent the figure of precarious work and its desire for communication, transportation, housing, resources, and affection. Originally developed as a means to "celebrate" the newly generalizing conditions of working on Sundays (which has until recently been quite rare in Italy), San Precario quickly caught on as a meme and rhetorical device for bringing to public discussion precarious conditions and instability. San Precario has since appeared at numerous rallies, actions, parades, and events, where followers have had "miracles" performed for them such as the autonomous reduction of prices.

This practice of autoreduction, or negotiating by mob, originated in Italy during the 1970s to combat rapid inflation in costs of food, clothing, electricity, and other necessities (accompanied by squatting and a massive refusal of payment). This practice was renewed at a guaranteed income demo on November 6, 2004 at a supermarket owned by the former Italian prime minister Silvia Berlusconi when 700 people entered the store demanding a 70% discount on everything, chanting that "everything costs too much." While negotiations occurred many people simply left with food and provisions, many of whom had not been involved in the demo at all.

Another innovative tactic was the announcement of a fashion show by a controversial designer, Serpica Naro, to highlight conditions of precarious workers. In February 2005, during the Milano Fashion Week, anti-precarity activists disrupted a high profile Prada catwalk, and threatened to disrupt a Serpica Naro fashion show to be held at a Milano car park only accessible by one bridge. Police contacted the show's agent to warn him about the possible

disruption. But as the event began, the police became confused when the crowd, which they expected to disrupt the show, started laughing at them instead of appearing angry and frustrated since they were being blocked from moving. And, stranger was that they were accompanied by the models and organizers themselves, who then proceeded to produce permits showing that it was they who had organized the show to begin with! There was no Serpica Naro — it was all a hoax based on a clever anagramic rearranging of “San Precario.” When the media began to arrive, still largely unaware of this, they were treated to a fashion show highlighting the precarious conditions of those involved in the fashion industry and related sectors (such as garment manufacture). This event turned the tables in a highly media saturated political climate like Italy (where much of Berlusconi’s power was through his use and control of the media) and managed to break down expectations of what constitutes activism and political action. The most visible expression of the concept, adopted by various sections of the anti-globalization movement, are the EuroMayDay Parades, which started in Italy in 2001. Employing carnival-like forms of protest and tactical absurdity, these events sought to revive the Wobbly tradition of humor and satire in politics as well as breaking with more traditional trade unions and social democratic parties, which had taken part in the institutional decision making that ushered in the currently increasingly intense and unstable social conditions.

Precarity was used as a rallying cry to find points of commonality between forms of labor and generalized social situations of insecurity, for instance between the positions of low paid workers in chain stores, computer programmers and data manipulators, and the highly exploited and blackmailed labor of undocumented migrants. The goal was to tease out these common points and positions, build alliances across the social sphere, and find ways to bring together antagonisms against these common but differing forms of exploitation.

The first May Day parade in Milano brought out 5,000 people and created a flying picket that succeeded in shutting down all the major chain stores in the city center. By 2003 the event grew to 50,000 people and inspired similar events across Europe. A continent-wide network was created in 2004 during the “Beyond the ESF” forum in England that took place at the same time as the European Social Forum (ESF) and led to events taking place in 20 cities across Europe in 2005 and a march of 150,000 in Milano.

In many ways, this seemed a very fitting approach, for the concept of precarity described quite aptly many of the situations of various emerging movements, such as the Intermittents du Spectacle, a group of seasonal arts and cultural workers who attracted attention by organizing against their uncertain situations by disrupting live TV news broadcasts and the Cannes Film Festival. San Precario himself, who is now widely used in the media to refer to these forms of organizing, has both a holy day (February 29) and a sacred location (created during an occupation of Venice Beach during a film festival there). The concept also seemed to capture well the organizing of casualized Parisian McDonalds workers who occupied their workplaces; migrant organizing against detention and deportation (such as the often celebrated san papiers movement of undocumented migrants); and many other of the struggles that have emerged recently.

It could arguably be used to describe organizing such as the recent actions against changes in immigration law in the US and around the conditions of domestic and sex workers, the recent (and first) demonstrations by workers against Wal-Mart that occurred in Florida, as well as the IWW Starbucks Workers Campaign, the New Zealand based “Super Size My Pay” organizing, and the Taco Bell boycott campaign put together by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (and the Student-Farmworker Alliance that grew out of it). These are claimed as signs of the emergence of a new social subject, the precariat, which is the condition of autonomous proletarian self-activity in the increasingly exploitative conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

But in many ways, haven’t we been precarious for quite some time? As Jacques Ranciere observes in the quote that begins this article, a precarious existence is perhaps the defining condition of the proletariat: indeed, the bloody terror and dispossession of primitive capitalist accumulation is precisely the process through which a state of precarity, the inability to effectively live outside of capitalist relations, is created.

And, what does it mean to speak about precarity in situations that have a far different political, economic, and social context? For instance in the US, where to a large extent there have never existed the forms of “job contracts” and labor protection that are now under attack in places like Italy and Spain.

In such a context, it is silly to talk about the process of social relations becoming precarious, because they have been for a very long time. And in countries where such protections existed, they only operated for a relatively brief

period of time, namely the era of the Fordist-Keynesian welfare/warfare state that existed from the end of WWII until the 1980s.

In some ways, arguments around precarious labor emerge out of, and are based upon, certain latent assumptions and conditions concerning the role of the welfare state and social democracy that are fundamentally different from those that exist in the US. They rely implicitly upon people recalling what might, in general, be described as the slightly better job that various European attempts at social regulation of the economy and creating forms of security for their populations, admittedly measures taken because of the larger and more militant social movements that have existed there. In other words, discussions around precarity draw some of their rhetorical force from an implicit positive appraisal of conditions that formerly existed in which people were not in a precarious position. Or, perhaps they were less threatened by insecurity previous to the relatively recent attacks on social welfare and corresponding deregulations of labor markets and dismantling of social security measures along with the creation of larger political frameworks (such as the European Union) that have enforced a large degree of these changes on individual nation-states.

This can be seen in the usage of ideas posed as a response to precarious conditions, such as basic guaranteed income and flexicurity. Basic income was an idea first popularized in the milieu of 1970s autonomist politics, particularly in Italy, to argue that people held the rights to a basic form of subsistence and ability to survive regardless of forms of recognized labor they were involved in. This was important both in acknowledging the importance of the many activities of social reproduction (housework, caring for children and the elderly, etc) that are usually unwaged, and in trying to separate income from labor time spent in forms of capitalist work.

Flexicurity, as a concept, emerged more recently, most noticeably as a policy of the Danish government, which has taken the somewhat paradoxical approach of both deregulating labor markets and forms of employment while also strengthening the provision of social welfare services (as opposed to the usual tact of dismantling the apparatus of the welfare state at the same time). Social movements have thus used notions of flexicurity across Europe, usually inflected with a more radical tinge, to argue for measures to support people's ability to exist under conditions of instability and uncertainty. In other words, the argument is made that it is not the uncertainty of flexible conditions and employment itself that is necessarily undesirable in itself, but rather that there are not measures existing to ensure that people can be secure in these conditions: thus the idea of flexicurity, or flexible security.

It should be readily obvious how such arguments are inflected to various degrees by social democratic assumptions. After all, who is going to provide this basic income / flexicurity? If not the nation-state, then where are the measures enacted from, the EU? Some other political space that has not clearly emerged yet? As Brian Holmes argues in the essay "Images of Fire," forms of violence and racism have already injected themselves into the notion of flexicurity and thus overdetermine it in a context marked by exclusion. In other words, a concept that emerged in a context of racism and forms of social domination, in this case a reliance on the hyper-exploited labor of migrants and in domestic spaces, cannot easily be separated from this context without being shaped by it. This is not to say that such is necessarily the case, but rather that there needs to be serious discussion about how those kinds of dynamics can be avoided, particularly if a concept such as precarity is to be used in the US, which has a long standing and particularly intense history of intersecting dynamics of race, class, gender, and social power.

Also, and perhaps more fundamentally, there is a risk of identifying common positions and grounds for struggle by drawing out the implications of changes in the forms of labor that do not necessarily resonate with those experiencing them, or do not necessarily produce unproblematic alliances. As the Madrid-based feminist collective, *Precarias a la Deriva*, observed, while those involved in designing a webpage and providing a hand job for a client can both be understood to engaged in a form of immaterial labor (forms of work more based on cultural or symbolic rather than physical production), one which is connected through overall transformations on structures of labor and social power, these are two forms of work hugely inflected by the social value and worth assigned to them.

Thus, any politics based on the changing nature of work has to consider how differences in access to social power and the ability to have a voice about one's conditions affect organizing from those conditions, and the possibility, as well as difficulties, of creating alliances between them. To continue using the same example, how do we form a politics based upon those conditions without those involved in a form of labor with greater social prestige (for instance, web design or computer-based work) speaking for those who do not have the same access to forms of

social power and ability to voice their concerns (in this instance, prostitutes). There is a huge potential to recreate a form of paternalistic liberal politics, only this time based upon an understanding of a connected position in an overall form of economic transformation.

Or to use another example, one could argue that both the people involved in the riots that started in the Paris suburb, Clichy-sous-Bois, and spread across France last year, and those involved in the massive student and labor protests and occupations against the introduction of new flexible labor contracts for French young workers, are involved in organizing against the same dynamics of uncertainty and exclusion.

That, however, does not mean that there is easily or necessarily a common basis for political alliance between those positions based upon that shared condition. Or, at the very least there is not a basis for alliance between those two situations until political organizing occurs which draws upon those conditions to create common grounds for alliance rather than assuming one exists based on large scale transformations in social and political power.

To borrow another argument from *Precarias a la Deriva*, perhaps rather than using a notion of precarity and its forms based on the changing compositions of labor (such as those embodied in an understanding of the difference between a chainworker and a brainworker), it would be more useful to consider how differences in social position and conditions creates possibilities for differing forms of insurgency and rebellion, and how to work between these various possibilities.

This is the question that ultimately determines whether a concept such as precarity is useful within a US context: can it be used to contribute to constituting a common ground of the political that does not recreate conditions where certain groups assumptions are foisted upon others or where the implicit social democratic assumptions work their ways into radical politics? The idea is not to import a discussion around precarious labor and radical politics from Italy, France, or Spain in the hopes that such ideas and practices could just be translated and reused unproblematically.

It is not a question of literal translation of the words, but a translation that finds resonance with a particular cultural, social, and political context. Rather, the task is to learn from the way that discussions around precarity have been developed to ferment political antagonisms and everyday insurgency in a particular context, and to see how a process like that can occur elsewhere, drawing from particularities of the location. The grounds of politics themselves are precarious, composed of an uncertain and constantly shifting terrain. Whether a concept such as precarity is useful for recomposing the grounds and basis for a radical politics is not something determined by the concept itself; but rather how those who use it employ it.

Further Information/Readings

Mute Magazine "Precarity" Issue: www.metamute.org/en/Precarious-Reader
Republicart.net "Precarity" Issue: www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/index.htm
Fibreiculture "Precarity" Issue: www.journal.fibreiculture.org/issue5/index.html
Chainworkers: www.ecn.org/chainworkers
EuroMayDay: www.euromayday.org
Precarias a la Deriva: www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias.htm
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