

Precarious Politics and Recomposing the Radical Imagination

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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 (1989: xxxiii)

During the past decade in Italy and Spain, but now having spread more broadly, there has emerged a discussion about precarity and precarious labor.¹ 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, or revive and renew existing methods, to contest forms of social domination and exploitation found within neoliberal capitalism. This is a timely and needed intervention, 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, as reported in the *Greenpepper Magazine* issue on the subject (2004). Thus elaborating methods of contestation fitting to the current political and social situation, to explore directions for recomposition corresponding to these dynamics, becomes an increasingly important task. What I want to do in this essay is not to reopen the question of precarity in its entirety, for to do so would be to reopen the entire history of capitalism in so far that precarity is a foundational dynamic within it, constrained and contained during certain periods by forms of social resistance and the incorporation of these energies into the apparatus of governance, the current composition of capital-labor-state relations. Rather than reopening the question of precarious labor in total, the angle will be to explore precarity as a moment and trope for movement building, to explore the ways in which it has functioned as a point of political recomposition, and the formation of imaginal machines within this compositional space.

Precarious Understandings

We know that precariousness is not limited to the world of work. We prefer to define it as a juncture of material and symbolic conditions which determine an uncertainty with respect to the sustained access to the resources essential to the full development of one's life. This definition permits us to overcome the dichotomies of public/private and production/reproduction and to recognize the interconnections between the social and the economic. – Precarias a la Deriva (2005)

The discussions about precarity are inspired by the legacy of workerist and autonomous politics in Italy originating from the 1960s and 1970s. But in some ways the stark contrast between the nature of the precarity discussed, separated by several decades, makes them appear to be almost totally disconnected conversations. One might say that there seems almost to be two (if not more) kinds of precarity, or that the precarity discussed in the 1970s is something completely different from the kind discussed today. This is not because that actually is the case (at least in the concept itself), but rather the two conversations occur in different compositional moments, where the precarity discussed today is almost the inverse form of that discussed in the 1970s. In the 1970s it was common to employ the phrase *precario bello*, or that precarity was beautiful. And when one thinks about it in context, this is an eminently sensible thing to say when you think about what the kind of 'security' and 'stability' is created by working in a petrochemical factory or on an automobile assembly line for forty years. The Fordist-Keynesian deal, made possible (or perhaps more accurately made necessary) by long term waves of labor struggle and radical politics, had created conditions for certain kinds of material stability and security within sections of the industrialized west, although this came at a cost in other aspects. Assuaging working class populations through

increased material consumption had long been a feature of this arrangement (think for instance of Ford's higher wages for assembly line work), but this had limits to which it could be effective.

These growing disenchantments expressed themselves in massive waves of strikes (many of them wildcat strikes) and bouts of work refusal. This was perhaps even more the case in Italy, which unlike sections of the US or Germany that had been operating with a factory system for several decades, Italy's economic and development 'miracle' of the 1950s and 1960s meant that industrial production had been established there for less time.ⁱⁱ The wave of internal northern migration in Italy also resulted in large amounts of workers who did not feel themselves particularly welcome within the ranks of the Italian Communist Parties or larger unions, thus feeding waves of discontent leading to the proliferation of industrial action not coordinated by the unions or the party. These revolts against work, against the factory and the production line, coalesced into the figure of "Gasparazzo" as a mythical embodiment of industrial action and resistance. There is a rough correspondence to the figure of the slacker or dropout within US (and broader) counterculture and politics, although this comparison perhaps obscures as much as it clarifies. Obscures in the sense that the refusals and forms of exodus occurring within the factories and metropolitan spaces in Italy were by and large of a collective character, while not surprisingly in the US the direction of drop out and withdrawal tended to take (or at least was ascribed) a much more individualistic character. It is for this reason that one of the most interesting and important aspects of workerist politics, working class refusal and the drive to collective exodus, is misunderstood precisely because it is assumed that the politics of withdrawal and exodus are necessarily a middle class politics precisely because it does not seem possible for it to be otherwise.

This hatred of the factory and the assembly line, congealed in the figure of Gasparazzo, over time found itself differently expressed, as the resistance of the mass worker spread throughout the social fabric. This was theorized as the movement of the resistance of the socialized worker, which occurred within the diffused factory. This also found expression in the rise of precarious patterns of work embraced as a positive feature, for instance working for several months to raise funds for a trip, or project, or a period of finding some escape from wage labor. This came together in the German context as the jobber movement, finding ways to work when necessary to raise funds, but then to use those resources (as well as squatting and other forms of collective appropriation) to create spaces and times outside of the constant discipline and requirements of wage labor. There was also a concomitant rise of forms of self-organized, small scale, flexible production and work organization that provided forms of material sustenance. All of these together created a sense that precarity was something that indeed could be thought of as beautiful, as a means out of the confines and standardization of factory labor, particularly as experiments in collective living and securing material resources provided the support for the emergence of vibrant forms of community and living.

It is this sense of a beautiful precarity, of a greater sense of flexibility and life arrangements, and ability to collectively subtract (at least partially) from capitalism, that necessitated and determined capital's response, thus leading to the inversion and transformation of precarity into the sense now used. Flexible and dispersed forms of production and organization were adapted and developed within capitalist firms (these forms, such as autonomous work teams and groups, as well as flexible production methods, come to increasing prominence and attention within management literature in the 1970s), and the forms of flexibility and contingent working embraced as beautiful precarity come to imposed as used as means of discipline and control. Capital's response to these diffuse and creative forms of resistance, emerging forms of sociality, was something like saying "You want flexibility, fine, we'll give you flexibility!" – flexibility in an imposed, rather than embraced sense. It could take the form of a part time job that always remains at a level of hours low enough to not qualify for benefits or health insurance, or to be able to survive on just one job. But forced and

imposed flexibility was not just something that comes about through changes in bounded workplace environments, it was also embodied in an overall change of regime of accumulation and mode of governance, namely that of the transition to a neoliberal economic order that occurred starting in the late 1970s and 1980s. It is one thing to be able to embrace precarity as beautiful when there is a strong welfare state and means of social support existing (not to mention the existence of support through movement networks and communities), it is another to attempt to do so when both the social support programs have been attacked and scaled back and the movements and communities have been crushed, dispersed, or fallen apart.

Precarity then is not just the absence of the state, or its withdrawal, or rolling back social programs, although in some ways it is all these things. It is not the passive non-presence of the state in spheres in which it was once active, but rather the active withdrawal of government activity from certain areas of life, such as those regulating work relationships or providing welfare programs. As Olmedo and Murray show (2002), drawing from the Argentinean experience, precarious labor arises through the active withdrawal of the state from these areas in a way that formalizes and establishes their non-regulation, or more accurately their regulation through non-intervention. Thus precarity is not only characteristic of the informal and quasi-legal labor markets, but rather an implemented destructuring of regulations that is the capitalist response to social struggles. Or, more accurately, that was taken on as the capitalist response to struggle entering the neoliberal phase (as opposed to the Fordist-Keynesian adaptation of resistant energies with a framework based around that form of state and approach to policy). Although more often it is not presented this way, but rather is explained as a means of attaining a higher degree of global competitiveness, as an inevitable effect of the dynamics of globalization, as an outcome of a structural adjustment program, or any number of variations on similar themes.

Although the term precarity had been used previously (although the 'beautiful precarity' of the 1970s is often ignored or forgotten within more recent discussions),ⁱⁱⁱ its contemporary usage derives from the efforts of the labor organizing and media activism collective Chainworkers, a Milan-based group which formed in 1999-2000. 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 (Foti 2004). The IWW has long been a key point of reference in autonomist politics, serving as a model of radical labor politics outside party structures that found ways to organize forms of labor often ignored by other unions, and also employing varied forms of cultural politics within its organizing. In conditions where work to a large extent no longer occurs primarily within centralized locations of productions (such as factories), but is distributed across much larger geographic scales, in the diffuse workings of the social factory.^{iv} The task was drawing from this history of subversion and reformulating it within present conditions, or finding ways to articulate the politics of a communicative Wobbly, weaving affective-linguistic territories through organizing across the social field. Or as Ben Trott phrased it in his discussion of precarity as a machine for moving back to everyday resistance,

Perhaps, then, we require something along the lines of a Post-Industrial Workers of the World in order to provide an open, horizontal structure within which a multitude of resistances can coordinate themselves; an organizational form which, as was the case with the original IWW, allows for all of those involved in acts of social production to 'plug in' to the network as and when they need, to draw upon resources, experience and the solidarity of others, whilst constructing basis-democratic forms of organization on both a local and a global level (2005: 230)

Given the drastic changes occurring within forms of work, it was necessary to update and reformulate labor organizing tactics to address them. While there have long existed many forms of contingent and precarious labor, they have become increasingly central since the neoliberal reaction to the social insurgencies of the 1960s and 1970s which gave rise to capitalist counterattacks in the 1980s. The Chainworkers 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 into which capitalist dynamics have seeped. As the formerly existing space of the workplace was fractured by changes in the 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. In other words, being located with 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. That is not to say that workplace culture and culture more generally were not important to the working of capitalism before; the existence and importance of workplace and working class culture is quite extensive. The workplace has always been a cultural field, the change is the degree of importance that cultural production has within the process of production, not whether the production process is cultural. This is to say that the cultural sphere has come to play a more integral role within the current composition of forces, actors, and positions enmeshed in the workings of capitalism. The changed compositional role of cultural production within the workings of capitalism means that the potentiality for struggles contained within it is transformed, not necessarily because it is the most advanced sector of capitalist development, but because as cultural production plays an important role within capitalism it offers more possibilities for disrupting capitalist dynamics, for connecting multiple struggles. The struggle over culture within production is not new, not at all, but is rather a question that is reopened within a changed compositional context. As Andrew Ross explores with great skill (2003), despite all the hoopla about the allegedly non-hierarchical 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.

In some ways a number of the difficulties in forms of self-organization and the tensions in self-managed forms – have come to more broadly affect sections of media and cultural labor. This does affect those involved in these workplaces in the same ways in that most projects are not founded on the political goals of abolishing capitalism and the state, although there is perhaps much in that rhetorical line that they would borrow from in terms of liberating human potential and creativity, humanizing the workplace and so forth. And in this way many new media workplaces and cultural labor generally is caught in many of the same binds, even if not for the same reasons. This is not so surprising, because as already argued, 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 turn them into increasingly uncertain conditions as social welfare provisions and neoliberal deregulation were brought into the effect. Precarity emerges as a discourse and focus of organizing in conditions where it is those very conditions that are being strategized through and against.

Back to the Everyday

If we accept that capitalism is a social relation, and one which has escaped the confines of the factory wall and permeated every aspect of society at that, there is no particular reason as to why the cities, streets and golf greens surrounding international summits should not themselves become sites of struggle. The problem, of course, is not really that mobilizations take place around international summits, but that these mobilizations become reified and fetishized as the *de facto* form of anticapitalist resistance today. – Ben Trott (2005: 227)

At its best, precarity as a conceptual terrain and area of focus is quite useful in creating an opening for the politicization of everyday life and labor relations. This served an especially important role in a period where the social energies unleashed by the anti-globalization movement and protest summits had reached their limit and encountered with increasing intensity the problems of their own predictability, the increased ability of police to control them (as well as their recuperation by media starlets and the Bonos of the world), and the flagging of their creative vitality. The anti-globalization movement functioned in finding ways to contest and make visible networks of power and governance in the neoliberal order, forms which because of their diffuse and somewhat abstract character were difficult to frame in a way that directly connected with people's everyday lives (although admittedly this was more of a difficulty in the Global North, in much of the world struggling under the brunt of structural adjustment programs and privatization this was much less of a concern). This explains the large focus on consumer politics, sweatshop production, and related concerns that provided a large degree of focus for movements during the 1990s, as they were points of focus where one could clearly articulate how one's everyday actions and decisions connected to a global system of capitalist exploitation, connecting shopping malls in Minnesota to the factories of South Asia. Summit protests proved a logical compositional step from this focus, as a congealing of forces articulating how these varied forms of economic power, ecological destruction, and antidemocratic forms of power were linked through transnational institutions in which much of the world's population has little or no say over the decisions made that directly and quite significantly affect them. The problem is that the everydayness of anti-corporate politics were somewhat lost within the spectacular form and manifestation of the summit events. In other words, attention was shifted somewhat towards the particular spaces oriented around the summits. This led to some quite sharp debates on how to bring these social energies back into community organizing and politics.

A focus on precarity opened up a space for deploying a cultural politics based around a realization that the unstable and uncertain forms of social life that now 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 Third World is connected to 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. And most importantly did so in a way that shifted attention to people's everyday lives and relations by focusing not just on a transnational form of governance, an institution over there, or a sweatshop half way across the world, but the forms of domination and exploitation connecting low wage and unstable jobs, migration controls, restrictions on health care and social support, and so forth. And also quite importantly began to address these areas by drawing from the resources, creativity, and imaginal arsenal developed within the anti-globalization movement, bringing a new sense of vitality to organizing.

This was accomplished through the development of an array of cultural symbols and actions, such as the figure of San Precario, which detourns and uses the common image of the Catholic saint to represent the figure of the precarious worker and her desire for communication, transportation, housing, resources, and affection. Originally developed as a means to "celebrate" the newly

generalizing conditions of working on Sundays (which had until recently been quite rare in Italy), San Precario quickly caught on as a meme. As Marcello Tari and Ilaria Vanni observe, his image functions “as a rhetorical device to move into the public arena a critical awareness of the changes in conditions and forms of work, of the shift from permanent positions to casual” (2005). 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. There is even a sanctuary devoted to San Precario (the gazebo of the beach occupied during the Venice Film Festival) and a Saint’s Day, February 29th, itself a precariously occurring day. 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 Silvio 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 holding of fashion show by the designer Serpica Naro to highlight conditions of precarious workers.^v In February 2005 during the Milano Fashion Week anti-precarity activists disrupted a high profile Prada catwalk, and then threatened to disrupt a fashion show for the controversial designer Serpica Naro, planned to be held at a car park in Milan 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 was supposed to “disrupt” the show), starting laughing at them, instead of being angry and frustrated since the police were preventing them from moving. Even stranger was that they were accompanied by the models and organizers themselves, who then proceed to produce the 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 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, which starting in 2000 had started to become adopted by various sections of the anti-globalization movement, are the EuroMayDay Parades,^{vi} 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 increasingly intense and unstable social conditions. Precarity was used a rallying cry to find points of commonality between forms of labor and generalized social situations of insecurity, for instance between the positions of lowly paid workers in chainstores, 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 chainstores in the city center. By 2003 the event has grown to 50,000 people and inspired similar events across Europe. A European network was created in 2004 during the “Beyond the ESF” forum in Middlesex that took place at the same time as the European Social Forum and led to events taking place in 20 cities across Europe in 2005. Although it seems that the success (at least in terms of attendance) of the

EuroMayDay marches has waned since then, and as Chris Carlsson has explored, perhaps more fundamentally, has been waning from several hundred thousand over the past several decades (2006). Although this involves a transformation of what was traditionally a large event coordinated by the Communist Party to one being put together by a much more diffuse network of organizers and media activists rather than a formal party structure.

And 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. 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 actions against recent 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 campaigns such as the IWW Starbucks Workers Campaign, the New Zealand based “Super Size My Pay” campaign, 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.

The problem, compositionally (or one of the problems) is that while the networks and connection of the anti-globalization movement and its form of political composition was quite important as a starting point for the building of these networks, they also tended to keep organizing around precarity confined within that space. There was a shift in focus and rhetoric within the organizing, but one that also faltered around the limits of the composition of the anti-globalization movement rather than going beyond them. So while a focus on precarity was useful as a means for thinking about the kinds of power and exploitation in everyday life and organizing around that rather than summit convergences necessarily, this form was recreated within the organizing anyways. In other words, rather than focusing on the ordained symbolic events of disrupting transnational institutions, the focus switched to organizing around the EuroMayDay parades. There is nothing inherently flawed in organizing around a May Day event, but the problem is when that becomes the main focus, to such a degree that it is hard to see in what ways struggle around precarity is actualized in forms other than the EuroMayDay parades. This again is to reduce a diffuse and creative politics of the everyday into a fetishization of particular moments, albeit an array of movements that at least are arranged according to the timeframe of those organizing them rather than the dates and places chosen by any number of transnational institutions aimed to be disrupted (and thus has less of a reactive character). This dynamic and limitation is perhaps not all that surprising. As one of the members of the publication *Wildcat* pointed out to me, organizing around precarity had in some ways merely transferred the activism of the anti-globalization movement into a changed rhetorical framework without really working through the tensions and contradictions and tensions faced there. There is a degree of truth in this, although it still seems sensible to appreciate the creativity and usefulness of this move even and despite the unresolved tensions it still carried within it.

Networks, Structure, Logic

The proletarian experience is ‘naturally’ one of being organized (interpolated) but this organization also imposes the necessity of an ambivalence in that structuration – in other words, the organization of workers by capitalism is already/always by capital, for capital and against

capital. – Frere Dupont (2007)

A kind of waiting madness, like a state of undeclared war, haunted the office buildings of the business park. – J.G. Ballard (2000: 3)

There are perhaps more fundamental questions and tensions facing those organizing around precarity, although it must be said that these are in some ways the same tensions that would be likely to confront the project of recomposing radical politics today, to some degree, regardless of the particular focus. One of these is the difficulty of moving beyond the existing forms of networks, connections and compositions found within a movement, to find ways to be self-expanding and create waves and cycles of struggle, rather than falling into a self-marginalizing or limiting patterns of social interaction. To take an angle that might seem strange at first, and likely a bit provocative later, it would be useful to draw from Barbara Ehrenreich's (2005) ethnography and exploration of the forms of insecurity and instability (and might we say precarity) that have slowly crept over the years into the lives of a group of people who generally are convinced that they would not have to deal with such, namely middle and upper middle class professionals, aspiring executives, and the denizens of the corporate world. Yes, even the lives of the suit wearing, management guru listening set, have come to be afflicted by degrees of uncertainty and job insecurity that would have been unthinkable only several decades ago. She describes the shadowy world of internet job searches, job coaching and image management, and networking and social events designed to assist the middle class executive "in transition" (read, not unemployed, that's something for the rabble) to a new form of employment, at a cost, of course. Aside from getting a glimpse into this dynamic and the surrealness of the corporate world, Ehrenreich makes some quite interesting observations about the logic of networking, which is constantly proclaimed by all the job coaches and advisors as being the most important, practically a job in itself for the precarious individual.

What Ehrenreich draws out of this is the blunt instrumentality of networking logic, one that undercuts the possibility of collective identity, commonality, and struggle based on these. In short, if through networking one is induced only to see others as possible contacts, leads, and sources of information, it is that dynamic that effectively prevents the emergence of any sort of real discussion of the common position of these people, of the reality that they are caught within such a bizarre world of pop psychology and quasi-magical aspirational thinking precisely because of the systemic instabilities of capitalism. Now, true, she is describing those who have been kicked to the curb of the corporate world, which is a somewhat different sort of habitus from the social existence of the people who have been involved in organizing around precarity. But putting aside the particularities of the individualizing logic of middle class executives and the specifically corporate world, it might be there is a similar dynamic occurring here, even it is a strange parallel. In corporate culture and management literature there is a constant injunction to see oneself as a creative, dynamic individual that is alone responsible for your success or failure. This sort of combination of quasi-mystical belief in the self as creative and the source of success, combined with a networking logic; how different is this from still-lingering romantic notions of artistic production and the logic of networking that is all too prevalent among cultural and media workers as well as those involved in artistic fields? Once one has stripped away the outward appearance of difference (they wear suits, the cultural workers look more boho, they both go for drinks in Shoreditch), this tendency to narrate collective problems within an individualizing narrative has the same dynamic of undercutting the possibility of collective identity or struggle. For just as we have yet to see the insurgent organization of displaced executives, the radicality and struggles of cultural and media workers in general (often despite the beliefs and politics people will lay claim to if asked) often leaves one a bit underwhelmed.

This is not to say that such couldn't happen, but rather that there are dynamics and tendencies found within the class composition of media, cultural, artistic labor that tend to work against the sort of alliances and connections that could most productively be made based around a focus on precarity. The point is not to dwell on these as a sigh of despair of organizing in such sectors, but rather to realize that doing so requires working against certain patterns of ingrained assumptions that tend to exist within these areas. There are useful tools for this found within the writing of Bifo, who has argued a number of different positions, that much like his politics in general, alternates between an infectious and joyous optimism, to a quite pessimistic and near mournful analysis inflected by all sorts of sad passions. For instance, in response to struggles of precarious workers and students in France, in 2006 he argued that this could provide the beginning of a new cultural and political cycle in Europe. That is not to say that the protests of the French students against changes in employment law could in itself defeat precarity. This is in absurd suggestion, for he argues that such a victory would actually be just the defeat of the legal *formalization* of precarity, which would then be posed within other contexts. But this in itself is a significant victory in that it could open a "phase of struggle and social invention which, beyond neoliberal slavery, will make it possible to formulate new rules, new criteria of regulation of the labor-capital relation" (2006). But this seems to contradict other arguments he had made about the possibility for organizing around precarity.

The year before he had argued that precarity was not a new condition, but rather was the black heart of capitalist relations, the transformative element in the whole cycle of production, and a dynamic that had only been regulated against with some degree of success for a limited period of the twentieth century under the political pressure of unions and workers, the presence of a relatively well functioning welfare state, and more or less full employment. It is only with these conditions that the violence and instability endemic of capitalism could be given some limits, conditions that as we have seen are no longer present. Furthermore, for Bifo the essential is not just the becoming, or one should say re-becoming of labor's precarity, but rather what he describes as "the dissolution of the person as active productive agent, as labor power" taking place as labor is fractalized through dispersed technological and communicative networks (2005). Bifo argues that this process of fractalization and deeper enmeshing of labor within technological networks, in flexibilized forms, creates a problem that prevents the struggles of precarious workers from launching a cycle of struggles:

Fractalized 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 labor and an existential temporal continuity. Without this proximity and this continuity, we lack the conditions for the cellularized bodies to become community. No wave can be created, because the workers do not share their existence in time, and behaviors can only become a wave when there is a continuous proximity in time that info-labor no longer allows (2005).

The thrust of Bifo's argument is that those engaged in precarious cognitive labor are capable of acts of rebellion, minor strikes, and so forth, but that they lack the conditions for those acts to coalesce into a wave or cycle of struggles. While the lack of physical proximity in some senses is understandable as a hindrance to organizing (after all, how much of labor organizing begins when someone turns to the person next to them in the line and says something to the effect of "this is a bit messed up"), this does not seem to be a fully adequate explanation. Historically there have been many instances of organizing lacking spatial proximity and overcoming that through creative means, from glyphs and marks left on walls to digital communications. Perhaps the problem of creating

waves and struggles has more to it than just physical proximity and has more to do with what Bifo refers to as an existential temporal condition, a condition of not sharing existence in a common time or framework that prevents individuated understandings and subjectivities finding their commonality. This seems to overlap a good bit with the tensions and difficulties Ehrenreich identified within a overriding logic of networking preventing commonality and solidarity from emerging precisely in such a logic it is only possible to regard others in a time frame working towards one's end, rather than ever occupying a common time or position.

While these are important questions to be raised, they are somewhat odd in that it is precisely these very concerns that organizing focusing on precarity hopefully would have addressed: to find ways to create common positions, understandings, and forms of collective time in a social and political context marked by the fractalization of labor and common time within the bounded workplace. To find ways to foster and develop these understandings and commonalities within a broader and more diffuse cultural politics precisely because of the difficulties faced on using the assumed experience of a common space, time, or framework. The question then becomes why such a project has stalled (or has appeared to have reached the limits of its creativity, as one might tend to think given the waning of EuroMayDay and the lack of renewed ideas and movements), and how the factors leading to the slowing or halting of a compositional process can be understood precisely to work through, within, and beyond them. This, after all, is perhaps *the* lingering question, one that most definitely lingers because it is never fully solved, at least not for good. To get at that, there are some questions to be raised around time, epochal divisions, and precarity. In many ways, haven't we been precarious for quite some time? As Jacques Ranciere observes in the quote that begins this essay, a precarious existence is perhaps the defining condition of the proletariat: indeed, the bloody terror and dispossession of primitive 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, if used as a unifying concept or framework, in situations that have a far different political, economic, and social context? Nate Holdren comments on this in an essay on the question of why there is no discourse around precarity in the US, or why one has not emerged in a similar manner (2007). For Holdren one might say that this is the wrong question, for framing it like that tends to overlook the ways that such a discussion exists, both in the sense of occurring under the banner of other terms but addressing the same questions (for instance in terms of casualization or marginalization) as well as occurring within sections of the milieu of cultural politics and organizing (for instance in forms like the *TempSlave* zine and the long running publication of *Processed World*). One can also see much the same questions being addressed in organizing around migrant labor and the work of the IWW as well as during the 1990s in the Love & Rage Anarchist Federation (which had a committee basically on precarity, or what they referred to as "anti-austerity work"). The difference between a US and European context is not a lack of addressing precarity per se, but rather that this has not come to fruition in any sense of mass mobilization per se (although one could see the massive organizing against the new immigration laws in 2006 precisely as organizing against precarity in many ways). From this Holdren concludes that the question about the lack of a discourse around precarity in the US is really a lament for stronger movement cultures and traditions, such as those that continue to exist in more pronounced ways in places like France, Italy, and Spain.

For instance in the US, where to a large extent there have never existed the forms of job contracts and increased forms of labor protection that are now under attack in places like France and Spain, 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 a sense this is exactly the question that a focus

on precarity reopens, that questions of the welfare state and its legacy, or the lingering presence of social support programs that still exist. But this is a question that is different within varying national contexts, for despite the tendency of enclosures in one place to be connected to and necessitate enclosures in other locations, the destructuring of the welfare state under neoliberal assaults is uneven in the same way that process leading to its formation was also uneven. The varying trajectories of the formation of the welfare state largely reflect how the insurgent energies of labor movements and social movements were territorialized and incorporated into a governing apparatus. So while the social and political context of the times could lead Richard Nixon to declaring in the early 1970s that ‘we are all Keynesians’ now, being a Keynesian in the US has a different inflection, with its unique history of responding to the radical left (by and large repression as opposed to varying forms of accommodation more common with an European context).

Turning to precarity as a focus brings into consideration not just the ways that labor regulations and social welfare measures were taken apart as a part of a neoliberal trajectory, but also the history of their formation, the process leading to the congealing of insurgent energies into forms of state. The question of precarity involves making sense out of this legacy, and what it means to a recompositional process today, how it enables and or disables movement, how it is possible or not to build from these trajectories. There is no great surprise in saying that 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. They rely implicitly upon people recalling what might, in general, be described as the greater success 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. This is perfectly sensible, as access to health care, a sense of security of life, material resources, and continued access to means of social reproduction are not just ‘immediate demands’ to be transcended into some purer form, but rather the very questions that underlie and make possible supporting livelihoods and communities. That their gratification and stability would hover as a constant theme in the imaginary of radical politics is nothing new, and has been a key feature of the radical imaginary from time immemorial. It is a question of finding ways to both defend the legacy of the welfare state and social support programs (that which continue to exist) but to also go beyond them, to continually remember that while they are important and worth defending they are not enough. The important difference is whether this is an unstated assumption, and if it is, what sort of less seemly dynamics are inadvertently brought along with these assumptions. In other words, whether it is a process of re-opening the question of welfare state and social solidarity, how to find ways to construct new social rights and institutional forms for their continued provision today, or falling back into an older model of the welfare state without considering the tensions and contradictions contained within it. This could take a form, for instance, where the provision of welfare is attached to an exclusionary or nationalist project, thus taking on a reactionary role in the policing of that border even while taking on a benevolent role to those marked to be within bounds.

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 is an idea popularized in the milieu of 1970s autonomist politics (although it has a much longer history),^{vii} particularly in Italy, to argue that people held the rights to a basic form of subsistence and ability to survive regardless of what forms of recognized labor in which they were involved. 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 has 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, 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's going to provide this basic income / flexicurity? If not the nation-state, then where are the measures enacted from, say, the EU? Some other political space that has not clearly emerged yet? As Brian Holmes argues, forms of violence and racism have already injected themselves into the notion of flexicurity and thus overdetermine it in a context marked by exclusion (2006). In other words, a concept that emerged in a context of racism and forms of social domination, in this case a reliance on the hyperexploited 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 places like the US, which has a long standing and particularly intense history of intersecting dynamics of race, class, gender, and social power. This is also an important consideration for using the concept anywhere outside of the social and cultural context from which it emerged. One should also note that Holmes, somewhat like the discussion of Bifo previously, has expressed both great hope and sensed possibility in organizing around precarity as well as reservations. For instance in an essay he wrote previous to the one just mentioned he noted the possibility that flexworkers can reinvent the welfare state (2007: 28). This is not to point out a contradiction, but rather perhaps that there was a common trajectory of responses to organizing precarity, one that started very hopeful and perhaps naively optimistic in some ways, but has since become more cautious about the possibility of large scale cultural and institutional change and the ways and forms that could occur through and in. As Holmes emphasized in his later article, what's important is keeping open the question of the welfare state rather than assuming it settled, either by being outmoded by neoliberal transformation or a simple reinvention of mechanisms for creating conditions for flexicurity, or flexible security.

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. Or to put it another way, while a common technical composition of labor is often useful in building alliances along that shared condition, a shared technical composition does not necessarily create conditions of shared political composition. To take technical composition for political composition neglects the labor of composition, the labor of self-organization that necessarily sustains and supports the emergence of collective antagonism. 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,^{viii} these are two forms of work hugely inflected by the social value and worth assigned to them. And thus any politics that is 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, sex workers). 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*^{ix} and spread across France several years ago, and those involved in the massive student and labor protests and occupations against the introduction of new flexible labor contracts for 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. This is the mistake that theorists such as Negri tend to fall into, which lends credence to the argument that the concept of the multitude effaces differences within itself in ways that are not particularly helpful for movement building.^x To borrow another argument from Precarias a la Deriva (2005), 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 would be to push precarity even more explicitly in the direction of a specifically recompositional machine rather than an analytic framework or structural analysis. That is not to say that analysis and structure are not important and functional to recomposition, rather that they are components within the imaginal machine rather than setting the framework for its construction.

Creative workers may indeed be held by many to be the exemplary figure of post-fordist labor, enmeshed in circuits of immaterial, precarious production, but as Angela Mitropolous points out, “this requires a moment in which the precarious conditions of others are declared to be a result of their ‘invisibility’ or ‘exclusion’” (2005: 91). This argument about exclusion and invisibility is more problematic than it might seem at first. As Mitropolous continues, the framing of migrant and precarious labor as invisible and excluded is most often then used, even if only implicit, as an argument for reconstructing a plane of visibility based on thematics of inclusion and recognition by mechanisms of governance. In this way she argues a strategy of exodus and refusal, one acknowledging and working from within a respect for autonomy and self-organization,^{xi} instead is transformed into a form of politics of juridical recognition and mediation through visibility. From that she poses the following:

Transformed into organizational 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 (2005: 91).

What Mitropolous gestures to here is the way the precarity as a focus has a danger of translating the core themes of workerist into categories of mediation, thus reintroducing the problematics of state thought and governance into the discourse. It is to that problem we will now turn.

Governance, Stepping Aside, and State Thought

The proletarian subject lacks nothing, certainly not more organization. It is always adequate to its situation... Organization of the proletariat by capital against capital is immediate because it is also latent, it is of the class, by the class, for the class – this is the nature of assigned subjectivity. Any further organizational structure introduces less not more ambivalence, more and not less ideological mystification. In the real world, there can be no conscious proposal for an organizational structure that is not also a proposal for either a non-class based leadership and/or a mystification of the proletariat's true capacities/position in the social relation. – Frere Dupont (2007)

The problem is that by and large this has not been worked through well enough within discussion around precarity. Rather the discussion is usually framed by, whether explicitly or implicitly, a narrative of precarity as a structural condition (and one that is generally understood to have emerged relatively recently) that can be countered by developing new means of social support, flexicurity, or a basic income. The latter is often spoken of in tones taking on an almost reverential or messianistic character, as though the coming of basic income will save us all from the ravages and demons of capitalism. Praise be! That is not to ignore more nuanced versions of an argument for a basic income, particularly ones based on an understanding of it as a recompositional pole, and also taking into account the varying national trajectories and political milieus where such demands are compositionally different within them. But given that related measures were contemplated by noted radicals as Richard Nixon and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1973), it is curious that they keep resurfacing within a political context still laying claim to some form of radicalism. Now we are all Nixonians?

More fundamentally, and more problematically, is the role this discourse plays in creating a conceptual space of stepping aside, a moment or space that appears to rise above the process of direct and concrete struggles. This operates through arguments of a common situation of precarity that is countered by measures to remediate that state. The forms of remediation do not seem to necessarily have to connect to the particularities of the situations and struggles which have been effaced in the transcendent structural condition. Thus they no longer flow from the real movement that struggles to abolish the state of things, to use a worn but still lovely phrase, but rather from an almost state-like function of thought that has preserved itself within the radical imaginary, cleverly hiding its nature. In this moment of stepping aside an uncritical focus on precarity carries within itself a state function, a mechanism of governance that operates by elucidating from populations their grievances, conditions, and concerns in ways that they may be more effectively governed through this enunciation. The problem is not necessarily that there is a form of governance or a strain of thought that has some state-like characteristics (unless one is being a purist about such matters). Rather, the problem is that because the potential governance function of a discourse on precarity operates as one but appears to do otherwise, it operates on a level where the power effects it animates cannot be apprehended by those who are involved in it. The dispersal of the state is only possible through an understanding of the forms of labor and the functions contained within them, the imaginaries, collectivities, and sociability embedded within the state even if not reducible to it (Harney 2002). Otherwise, the dispersal of the state could very well just mean the rise of governance as state function, less visible but all the more effective. In terms of political recomposition, this would mean that there very well could be a pattern where the appearance of increasing movement mobilization and building of cycles of struggle could paradoxically be accompanied by an internal decomposition of this movement itself through functioning of unrecognized state thought and mechanisms of governance within it.

And this is the question that ultimately determines whether a focus such as precarity is useful: can it be used to contribute to constituting a common ground of the political that does not recreate conditions where certain groups' assumptions are hoisted upon others or where the implicit social democratic assumptions work their ways unseen 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 just 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. As Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter point out, "the opposite of precarity is not regular work, stable housing, and so on. Rather, such material security is another version of precarity, consuming time, energy, and affective relations as well as producing the anxiety that results from the financialization of daily life" (2005). Rather than reclaiming life for work it a question of reclaiming a freedom of life from work, by being determined only by one's capacity as a form of labor, and the re-invention of value as the importance of sociality and interaction one is already engaged in that is not reducible to an economic calculus (Graeber 2001).

It is on these grounds that self-reproducing movements – or movements which take into account the conditions of their social reproduction, to use Silvia Federici's phrasing – are fostered (2008). It was this approach to movement building and composition, an affective one, that requires continual fostering and development. Indeed, the grounds of politics themselves are precarious, composed of an uncertain and constantly shifting terrain. Also, it is vitally important to not forget that precarity was once a beautiful concept, one that indicated a space of freedom and time for life. The translation and contextual reworking needed not only involves, as Klaus Neundlinger wisely points out (2004), not only countering the effects of neoliberal deregulation, but also turning around the concept of precarity itself, to find ways to reclaim and learn from the compositional potential is possessed. Their precarity as a condition of uncertainty is not just a hindrance (although it is some ways), but also a potentiality, an openness based on the fact that it is not fixed. 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. It is this recompositional politics, turning what has been recuperated from insurgencies and movements back into useful tools, practices, and energies for social movement and autonomous politics.

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ⁱ For more on precarity and organizing around it in general see the special issues on it: *Mute* (www.metamute.org/en/Precarious-Reader), Republicart.net (www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/index.htm), *Fibreculture* (journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/index.html). See also the blog *Precarious Understanding* (precariousunderstanding.blogspot.com) and that of Angela Mitropoulos (archive.blogspot.com).

ⁱⁱ For a good history of Italy that deals not just with this period but also the "Years of Lead," see Ginsborg (2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Some examples of previous use of precarity can be found in the work of Leonce Crenier, Dorothy Day (2006 [1952]), Sergio Bologna (1980), Federici and Fortunati (1981), and Bourdieu (2003), who referred to the current generation as a “precarious generation.”

^{iv} One could find similar inspiration in the organizing of the Independent Union of All Workers, an IWW inspired militant union that existed from 1933-1937, and focused on organizing all people in a town rather than specific workplaces. The aim was to achieve 100% unionization, a goal that according to Peter Rachleff (1996; 2008) was reached or almost reached in some locations. The little that is known about the history of the IUAW still leaves some lingering questions, such as how conflicts between different workplaces and their varying interests would be reconciled. Also, given the claims of the density and intensity of their organizing, their quick dissolution after some branches affiliated within the CIO seems rather unusual. One can find more contemporary organizing along similar lines in the work of the Vermont Workers Center who also organize on a town-wide rather than craft or union basis (www.workerscenter.org).

^v For more on this see www.serpicanaro.com.

^{vi} For more on EuroMayDay: www.euromarches.org

^{vii} Among the more noteworthy supporters and advocates of a basic income are Martin Luther King, James Tobin, John Kenneth Gailbrath, and Andre Gorz. One can also trace connections to the idea of the social wage and similar practices within guild socialism, anarcho-syndicalism, and cooperativist movements. For more on basic income, see Raventós (2007) and www.basicincome.org.

^{viii} And, as Guillaume Paoli points out, just as the transformation of gold coins into electronic funds did not completely transform the nature of money, the dematerialization of labor does not mean the end of its compulsive and coercive character nor the bodily exertion involved in it (2004). For more on the relation between gender, precarity, politics, and the debates around their conjunction, see the *Feminist Review* special on contemporary Italian feminisms, in particular Fantone (2007).

^{ix} For an interesting analysis of the 2005 riots see Emilio Quadrelli’s essay “Grassroots Political Militant: Banlieusards and Politics,” which explores the ways that the riots were not racial or religious in character but primarily directed against capital, the state, and institutions of domination. This is a useful counter to the typical argument that such riots are meaningless and purposeless nihilism, or alternately the cry of those who are seeking some form of representation within the space of liberal politics. Quadrelli explores the riots as being organized through an infrastructure of collective intelligence that while perhaps not readily visible exists. The riots for Quadrelli can be understood as form of endocolonial conflict and guerilla warfare. Quadrelli’s essay and a critical response to it were published by *Mute Magazine* in the collection *Scum of the Republic* (2007). For an insurrectionist analysis of the same events, see Argenti (2007).

^x Hydrarchist comments on this tendency within movements in Italy: “Social movements in Italy function best when external factors oblige cooperation and marginalize intra-movement rivalry, yet an inability to coldly appraise the efficiency of discarded strategies threatens to nullify the benefits of experience. The Gordian knots of representation, relations with the institutions, and internal and network democracy are not going away. With a centre-left government on the horizon, and the fertile ground for reactionary demagoguery that promises, the challenge will be to maintain abrasive contestation, autonomous from the party system, without being relegated to the margins, where the only dividend is unceasing police attention” (2005: 38).

^{xi} For Mitropolous’ analysis of these issues, exploring the relation between the autonomy of migration and workerist thought, see her essay “Autonomy, Recognition, Movement” (2007). This thematic informs her work on technology, borders and migration more generally and raises a number of important considerations that could use to be taken to heart and considered by autonomist movements. For a take on invisibility and labor that does not fall into this sort of trap, one finds a number of interesting ideas explored in Sergio Bologna’s writing on self-employment and the forms of organization it takes (2007).