

# Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception

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## **Abstract**

In 2003, the concept of precarity emerged as the central organizing platform for a series of social struggles that would spread across the space of Europe. Four years later, almost as suddenly as the precarity movement appeared, so it would enter into crisis. To understand precarity as a political concept it is necessary to go beyond economic approaches that see social conditions as determined by the mode of production. Such a move requires us to see Fordism as exception and precarity as the norm. The political concept and practice of translation enables us to frame the precarity of creative labour in a broader historical and geographical perspective, shedding light on its contestation and relation to the concept of the common. Our interest is in the potential for novel forms of connection, subjectivization and political organization. Such processes of translation are themselves inherently precarious, transborder undertakings.

## **Key words**

borders ■ the common ■ creative labour ■ Fordism ■ networks ■ new institutions ■ political organization ■ precarity ■ regulation school of economics ■ translation

## **What Was Precarity?**

**T**HERE IS by now a considerable body of research, in both academic and activist idioms, that confronts the prevalence of contingent, flexible or precarious employment in contemporary societies. Encompassing at once sociological and ethnographic studies as well as incorporating some of the most innovative theoretical work being produced in Italy and France, there is little doubt that research on this topic has gathered pace. Yet it is also the case that the critique surrounding precarity, to use

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the English-language neologism, has already enjoyed quite rigorous intellectual debate, particularly in online, open access publications that carry nothing like the intellectual property arrangements or impact factors of most prestigious scholarly journals. We have in mind the materials published in venues such as *Mute* (Mitropoulos, 2005; Vishmidt, 2005), *Fibreculture Journal* (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005a) and *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* (Dowling et al., 2007), not to mention the prodigious writing on the topic in non-English language journals such as *Multitudes* and *Posse*.

The debate that unfolded in these contexts was often fractious but, in retrospect, we can identify some common elements. At base was an attempt to identify or imagine precarious, contingent or flexible workers as a new kind of political subject, replete with their own forms of collective organization and modes of expression. In some cases, for instance among groups such as Chainworkers or Molleindustria working out of Milan, this involved an effort to mobilize youth with little political experience through striking works of graphic and web design as well as publicity stunts at fashion parades, in supermarkets and the like (Tari and Vanni, 2005). But the question of precarity remained a serious issue that, in its theoretical and political conception, would extend well beyond young people employed in the creative or new media sectors. In its most ambitious formulation it would encompass not only the condition of precarious workers but a more general existential state, understood at once as a source of ‘political subjection, of economic exploitation and of opportunities to be grasped’ (Lazzarato, 2004). Not only the disappearance of stable jobs but also the questions of housing, debt, welfare provision and the availability of time for building affective personal relations would become aspects of precarity (Foti, 2004). Life itself was declared a resource put to work and there emerged demands for a *social wage* or *citizen’s income* that would compensate subjects for the contribution made by their communicative capacities, adaptive abilities and affective relations to the general social wealth (Fumagalli, 2005). This led to a further series of debates regarding the status of non-citizen migrants as precarious workers (Agir ensemble contre le chômage, 2004). Related to this was the question of the gendered nature of precarious work. Groups such as the Madrid-based Precarias a la deriva (2005) began to focus their research and politics on the affective labour of female migrant care workers. Others began to approach precarity as an experience of ‘embodied capitalism’ (Tsianos and Papadopoulos, 2006). Others again drifted toward investigating the transformations to the university (edu-factory collective, 2006, 2008) and related issues of ‘cognitive capitalism’ (Vercellone, 2006).

Doubtless this is an idiosyncratic and selective memory of the debates sparked by the European precarity movement. We find it important to remember these antecedents not simply because they pre-date the growing scholarly interest in precarious labour. Nor is our own involvement with some of these initiatives the sole determining factor for this account. It is well known that academic work suffers from a time-lag and it would be disingenuous to claim that this disqualifies its validity or political effect

(Neilson, 1997). In the case of the debates concerning precarity, however, the period of this lag coincides with a demise of this concept as a platform for radical political activity, at least in the European context. To register this tendency it is sufficient to recall the fate of the EuroMayDay protests. This annual day of action against precarity, which began in Milan in 2001 and spread to 18 European cities by 2005, had entered a crisis by 2006. Similarly, militant research groups linked to the EuroMayDay process, such as the European Ring for Collaborative Research on Precariousness, Creation of Subjectivity and New Conflicts, had reached conceptual impasses and begun to fragment across this same period. As Sandro Mezzadra and Gigi Roggero (2007), two Italian thinkers and activists involved in these contexts, write:

EuroMayDay did not manage to generate common forms of organisation and praxis, and thus become a trigger, engine and catalyst of the struggles of living labour today, the principle of a new conflictuality and a political practice beyond the simultaneously manifest and unsolved crisis of representation.

The point is not to dismiss the European precarity movement out of hand. A report from an activist meeting held in Seville in May 2007 indicates a difference of opinion on the movement's legacy:

On the one hand there was some debate about a 'crisis of the EuroMayDay' process. While new cities were beginning to experiment with the action/process many had abandoned it and in Italy, where it had emerged, a schism has emerged. While for some this demonstrated that EuroMayDay was a tired process, others concluded that there is a crisis precisely because the process was successful. If the goal of EuroMayDay was to visibilize new forms of labor & life and problematize them, then this has to a degree been achieved. Precarity is on the political agenda (one way or another) in many European countries. Additionally, struggles around precarious issues are spreading far beyond a particular date in May (mention was made of the CPE revolt in France, a series of strikes in Denmark, the student mobilizations in Greece), thus the process may have served its purpose. (Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2007)

Whether we are witnessing the untimely exhaustion of a political process or its timely absorption into official policy circles, the point we want to make remains the same. The emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity. For us, however, this observation has to be qualified, not least because our own global trajectories (in and out of Europe through Australia and China) alert us to wider applications of the concept, or, perhaps more accurately, wider instances of its difficulty in gaining traction as a means of organizing radical political activity.

In Australia, the 2005 conservative government labour reforms known as Work Choices brought job security to the forefront of official political

debate, contributing to the electoral defeat of this same government in late 2007. But the concept of precarity did not feature in the many debates and campaigns, which frequently highlighted economic and existential experiences of risk and uncertainty. If one compares Italy, where, in 2006, the Democratici di Sinistra (DS) campaigned against Berlusconi under the slogan ‘Oggi precarietà, domani lavoro’ (Today precarity, tomorrow work), the difference is marked. Likewise, in China, where we have both been involved in critical research concerning, among other issues, labour conditions in the creative industries (see <http://orgnets.net>), the concept of precarity has not figured largely.<sup>1</sup> While it might accurately describe the work conditions of internal Chinese migrants who fuel the growth in this sector, and has been used by Hong Kong-based academics and labour organizers to describe the working lives of female migrants in the Shenzhen special economic zone (Pun, 2004, 2005), it was decidedly absent from the discourses surrounding creative labour in the city where we conducted our research, Beijing.<sup>2</sup> At stake here, we want to argue, is something more than differences in language, expression or the limited uptake of travelling theories (Wang, 2004).

We propose to test the hypothesis that the brief emergence of precarity as a platform for political movements in Western Europe has to do with the relative longevity, in this context, of social state models in the face of neoliberal labour reforms (Kuhnle, 2000). Precarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm. To this we can add other factors, such as the overproduction of university graduates in Europe or the rise of China and India as economic ‘superpowers’ in which skilled work can be performed at lower cost. But the point remains. If we look at capitalism in a wider historical and geographical scope, it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization. Thus, in regulatory contexts where the social state has maintained less grip – and here neoliberal Britain is a case in point – precarity has not seemed an exceptional condition that can spark social antagonism. To understand precarity as a political concept we must revisit the whole Fordist episode, its modes of labour organization, welfare support, technological innovation and political contestation. Far from the talk of ‘neoliberalism as exception’ (Ong, 2006), a deep political consideration of the concept of precarity requires us to see Fordism as exception.

In locating Fordism as exception, we do not assume capitalism as homogeneous. Nor, for that matter, do we see Fordism as homogeneous. Both have their internal variations, external impositions and mutual inconsistencies shaped by national, geocultural and historical contexts as well as institutional practices (Clarke, 1992). Moreover, the multiplicity of precarity as both ontological experience and labour condition is intimately tied to such variations. Instead, we wish to register how the discourse of precarity does not translate on a global scale as a descriptor of contemporary labour precisely because of its connection as a political-analytical concept and mobilizing device within predominantly European-based social movements

responding to the erosion of the welfare state.

That Fordism should become the point of departure for many activists whose social-economic formation occurred largely within post-Fordist settings suggests already that Fordism is perhaps best understood as exception. Importantly, this historical disjuncture between referent and experience is indicative, we argue, of two key propositions in this article: first, both precarity and the common are underscored by multiplicity and division; second, and following this, the shift from precarity as a political technology of the movements to precarity as an object of academic study signals another moment of untranslatability. The contradictions between and within translations of precarity do not lead us to conclude that precarity is a politics without consequence. Far from it. It is precisely on the diverse fronts upon which precarity finds itself that we find the many articulations of political intervention that indicate the common as a zone of translation. The disconnections and inconsistencies across precarity do point to a certain limited critical traction, but such limits are more peculiar to the sociological expectation of analytical and descriptive consistency. Our argument is that precarity is an ontological experience and social-economic condition with multiple registers that hold the potential to contribute to a political composition of the common.

### **What Was Fordism?**

Present understandings of Fordism, and in particular its relation to the Keynesian welfare state, are highly coloured by the account of the emergence of a new regime of ‘flexible accumulation’ or post-Fordism offered by the French regulation school of economics. Beginning in the 1970s, Michel Aglietta (1974, 1976) and a number of other exponents of the regulation school, including Boyer (1986), Coriat (1991) and Lipietz (1987), began to argue for the emergence of post-Fordism against the background of a quite particular understanding of the regime of accumulation it was seen to displace, Fordism. For these writers, Fordism was a system of production based on the assembly line, which was capable of high industrial productivity. But their analysis was not directed toward the conditions of the labour force under this accumulation regime: the rigidity of its command structure, the deskilling of workers, practices of industrial conflict or the relegation of women to the home through the institution of the ‘family wage’.<sup>3</sup> Rather, they emphasized the regulation of the relations of production by the state, focusing on the mediation and institutional reconciliation of social forces. At the heart of their interest was the relation between transformations in the processes of valorization and changes taking place in the socio-political sphere. This was a concern extended by writers such as Hirsch and Roth (1986) in Germany and Jessop (1991) in Britain. Through the writings of figures like Harvey (1989), these notions also began to gain influence in fields such as geography and cultural studies.

Here is not the place to offer an exhaustive account of the regulationist view of Fordism, but it is possible to note some of the major directions

of research. Beginning with studies of regimes of accumulation and models of economic growth in the United States, the initial focus concerned the expansion of Fordism into given national contexts. This was supplemented with studies of the international dimensions of regulation, examining the form and extent of the complementarity between different national contexts of growth. To this was added another strand of analysis that considered the relations of state and hegemony as crucial to social regulation. There also emerged a growing attention to international institutions of regulation and the ways they laid the foundations for a world economic order. As Feruccio Gambino (1996), whose argument we follow here, notes, the focus was not the social relations of production but the economic/state institutions that oversee them: '[T]he regulation school stresses the permanence of structures, and tends to overlook human subjects, their changes and what is happening to them with the disorganisation and reorganisation of social relations'.

Gambino, himself a labour historian of the auto industry, draws a distinction between 'regulationist Fordism' and what he calls 'pre-trade union Fordism'. The latter corresponds to the actual conditions of production in Ford Motor Company's factories from their establishment in 1903 until the advent of unionization in 1941. Drawing on Michael Bernstein's *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker 1933–1941* (1969), Gambino traces how 'the Fordist mania for breaking down the rhythms of human activity to confine it within a rigid plan' built on Taylorist techniques by adding authoritarian means of control. Speed-up, armed security guards, shop floor spies, physical intimidation and external propaganda were all part of the method employed by Ford to cut workers' contact with their peers and bind their labour to a pre-ordained tempo set by the factory's machinery. Only with the working-class revolts and factory sit-ins of the 1930s, and then the political encirclement of the other auto manufacturers, Chrysler and General Motors, did Ford finally capitulate to the United Auto Workers union after the tense and violent strike of 1941. 'If, by Fordism, we mean an authoritarian system of series production based on the assembly line, with wages and conditions of work which the workforce is not in a position to negotiate by trade union means', Gambino writes, 'then *Fordism was eliminated* thanks to the struggles for industrial unionism in the United States in the 1930s'.

As we know, this is not the story of Fordism's decline offered by the regulation school. For them, it is precisely after the Great Depression and the Second World War that Fordism enters its heyday, providing the basis for the expansion of the Keynesian 'effective demand' in the US and thus underpinning a stable welfare regime and system of social production from the 1940s. This system of production is seen to spread to Western Europe and Japan in the 1950s, converging with Keynesianism and lasting through to the end of the 1960s, when it goes into irreversible crisis. Regulationist Fordism thus has a relatively brief high season, dissolving when investments in the commodity-producing sector in the industrialized countries exceed

productivity, forcing capital to seek out production options and market outlets in the so-called developing world. In the regulationist view, the passage to post-Fordism thus at once maintains the dominant US imperial position and divides labour hierarchically and spatially along international lines. This leads to an intensification of the rhythm of accumulation, the breaking of collective bargaining, and the stratification of the labour force into a restricted upper level of highly skilled workers and a vast lower level of atomized and flexibilized individuals kept on low wages and in precarious jobs. To quote Gambino again: ‘Within this hypothesis there is an underlying assumption, in which Western institutions are seen as remaining solid (extremely solid in the case of the U.S.), while not only the institutions of the labour movement, but also living labour power as a whole appear as inescapably subjugated to the unstoppable march of accumulation’.

There are two elements of this story we believe are important for understanding the rise and fall of the precarity movement and its attempts to invent new post-Fordist forms of labour organization. First, the entire Fordist episode appears more contingent and shorter than previously imagined. By highlighting the authoritarian labour control of the Ford factories and the brevity of the convergence between centralized union bargaining and Keynesian welfare systems, the condition of precarity begins to appear as the norm of capitalism rather than an exception. This allows a more realistic historical assessment of the claims for the rapid escalation of contingent work put forward by the precarity movement, even if the question remains as to why the mobilization around the precarity meme occurred exactly when it did (in the wake of the massive anti-war protests of February 2003 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq). In particular, this approach offers a means of understanding why this political platform was able to expand rapidly in Western Europe, where the temporal switch between the welfare state and post-Fordist labour regimes was marked, but unable to gain a grip in other global sites where the economic and existential conditions of precarity were rife but also entirely normalized. Lauren Berlant’s (2007) account of the affective conditions of precarity and how they can result in an ‘aspirational normativity’ – the state of trying to construct ‘a less-bad bad life’ (2007: 291) – goes a long way toward explaining why precarity supplies little political motivation in situations where ‘dissatisfaction leads to reinvestment in the normative promises of capital and intimacy under capital’ (2007: 281). Given its focus on the Belgium-set films of the Dardenne brothers, Berlant’s article also helps explain why the platform of precarity, as embraced by well-educated European youth incapable of acceding to the professional positions for which they had trained, failed to spread to other European workers for whom ‘the ongoing prospect of low-waged and uninteresting labor is . . . nearly utopian’ (2007: 275).

This doesn’t mean that the precarity movement was misguided. The second point we want to make is that regulationist construction of post-Fordism in the light of state and international institutions that mediate the



social relations of production cannot account for the ways in which the production of labour power entails the *production of subjectivity* (Guattari, 1995; Read, 2003). In other words, the dominant theorization of post-Fordism leaves no room for the construction of new forms of political subjectivity or the invention of new institutional forms. Insofar as the precarity movement strived toward these ends, we are highly sympathetic. But we need to add that we don't believe such forms of invention are possible in a context where precarity is seen as an exception that emerges against a Fordist norm. Precisely because precarious labour is the norm of capitalist production and reproduction (or, better, the norm that blurs the boundaries between capitalist production and reproduction), it might contribute to the invention of new forms of political organization that stretch across the divisions and apartheid established by the speeded-up and flexible conditions of contemporary capitalist accumulation. On the one hand, this would mean pushing the concept of precarity much further than it has yet gone. On the other hand, it would mean asking much less of precarity as a political concept and not expecting it to ground political struggles in an all-encompassing or unifying way. At stake is a rethinking of the very notions we use to describe and analyse the current hierarchization and spatialization of labour, notions such as the international division of labour or the three worlds model of world geography (and its more contemporary binary elaborations, such as North/South). There is also a need to build precarity into the very solutions and alliances that might emerge from a practical rethinking of these notions: the construction of unstable institutions or organized networks from which to contest the current waves of capitalist development. In short, what is required is the acknowledgement and building of *commonalities* across the diverse situations in which labour is at work and *on the move* in the world today. These are problematics of translation we address below.

### **The Death of the Citizen-worker**

In an earlier article (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005b), we worried that the European precarity movement, in some of its manifestations, tended to address the state as an institution that might resolve the problems of security at work. This was implicit in many demands for the social wage or measures of *flexicurity*. Who, we asked, might finance such initiatives if not the state or some federation of states? It could be taken as a given that such welfare assistance was not assumed of the private sector. At the time, our concern was that such appeals might play into the securitization of state discourses and political language that was one of the hallmarks of the first half of the present decade. We were interested in the effects of a possible convergence between precarity at work and the ontological precariousness that Butler (2004) associates with the vulnerability and susceptibility to injury of the human animal. Now we want to extend this argument further by rethinking the vexed relation between capital and the state. This is not simply because the redirection of public investment to the security industries following the



dot.com crash of April 2000 is a tendency by now fully played out. Nor is it because the global economy is currently absorbing the effects of a credit crisis based on subprime lending to those with precarious housing circumstances, just as the corporate absorption of new digital social networking technologies promises a second web boom. Our focus is on deeper shifts to the relation between the figures of the citizen and the worker.

As we are aware from the years of polemic that followed Barthes' (1967) declaration of the death of the author, the pronouncement of the death of any subjective figure, particularly one ascribed with productive powers, is a dangerous move. In what follows, we write of the death of the citizen-worker less to claim the absolute disappearance of this figure than to identify what Sassen (2006) calls a 'tipping point' in the relations between the state and capital. It would be futile to deny that there is still a nexus of citizenship and labour. One thinks of how paths to citizenship can pass coercively through the labour contract, the persistence of collective bargaining through national trade union systems, or 'mutual obligation' schemes such as 'work for the dole' that have taken hold in Anglo-Saxon countries. But this citizenship-labour nexus can no longer be fully captured by the dyadic subject citizen-worker and the gendered division of labour that sustained its reproduction. It is not merely a question of the presence, in most political spaces, of migrant workers who are not citizens (and may not desire to become so). It is also necessary to account for the enhanced possibilities for many people to become citizens of particular jurisdictions through the investment of capital as well as the fulfilment of other requisite controls (health, absence of criminal record, etc.). In a more theoretical sense, we can say that the relation between labour and citizenship has ceased to produce in Western countries the materiality of what T.H. Marshall (1950) called the 'status of citizenship', which was meant to balance the obligations of contractual arrangements of citizenship in shaping social relations. And in the poorer zones of the world (wage) labour has ceased to be the key that allows access to full citizenship. Consequently, the subjective positions of both citizens and workers need to be rethought outside the dyadic structure of citizen-worker that can no longer be taken for granted and which underlies the construct of the national labour market.<sup>4</sup>

Both the figures of the citizen and the worker have been invested by diffuse practices of multiplication and division (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2008). Within the creative industries, regimes of intellectual property operate as an architecture of division: predominantly copyright in the cultural industries, but also patents that arise through technological innovation in the IT sector and trademarks in the advertising industry and its production of brands. McKenzie Wark (2004) considers the extension of intellectual property regimes with the advent of commercialized computer networks – what is generally understood as the Internet – to have produced a new class relation special to the information age. The antagonism between 'hackers' and 'vectoralists' moves around a property relation. Hackers are producers of intellectual property. Such activity is predicated on the

self-organization of labour and a value system of sharing that arises through social cooperation and an informational commons. Vectoralists, on the other hand, are understood by Wark as the ruling class of the ‘vectoral society’. Their power is built around ownership and control of both the media of transmission and the information of expression. Intellectual property regimes will always divide the experience of precarity between vectoralists and hackers. Precarity, while an ontological condition or experience that cuts across class and other divisions, can never (or, better, not alone) offer a new political subject or ‘common cause’, as Andrew Ross argued at the London School of Economics seminar from which the articles in this section derive.

Intellectual property, however, is not the only dividing factor. With division comes the possibility of multiplication. The informatization of social relations constitutes, as many commentators note, an intensification in processes of abstraction. The transnational nature of much work within information and knowledge economies is now well documented (Aneesh, 2006; Xiang, 2007). That labour in many instances should become unhinged from workers’ rights accorded to the citizen-subject is symptomatic of informatization (and hardly exclusive to it). Despite the increasing power of governance by supranational institutions, the nation-state and its legal organs retain a monopoly on the adjudication of rights, especially in the domains of labour and migration. While informational labour is typically carried out in the space of the nation (it also comprises modes of work in maritime and aviation industries), the conditions of employment and materiality of production frequently sever the citizen–worker relation. Short-term work visas granted to Indian programmers in the IT sector, for example, allow temporary migration to countries in need of high-skilled labour such as the United States and Germany (Aneesh, 2006: 32–40). Such governance of transnational labour and citizenship is complemented by the materiality or technics of production which, in the case of informational labour, allows for the high-speed transmission of digital data. The structure of IT labour is flexible and typical of much post-Fordist work, in other words. The circumstances of labour in architectural offices located in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou would be other cases to consider among many.

The example of creative labour is one we find useful in elaborating the constitutive potential the practice of translation holds for political organization. As mentioned at the start of this article and discussed below, the varied work of migrant labour – from the imported foreign expertise of programmers and architects to the multi-skilled capacities of the peasant farmer who becomes a construction worker and later a taxi driver – points to the highly diverse composition of precarity gathered around the sign of creative labour. How connection is built across these seeming social and class incommensurabilities is contingent upon translation. Again, we are not proposing a new political subject or common cause here. Rather, our emphasis is on translation as a social practice that brings differences into relation. To reduce labour within the creative industries to a separation between vectoralists and hackers is to attribute a determining role to the

property relation at the expense of complex forces and conditions that vary across and within geocultural and affective spaces. The supposed security afforded by intellectual property rights can thus be seen to contain its own element of uncertainty, beyond whether or not a potential commodity value is ever realized on the market. While dominant as a regulatory system of exchange within information economies, intellectual property regimes do not, in other words, offer much analytical insight into practices of translation within the creative industries. Nor do they tell us how the common is actively constructed through, and in spite of, social and political technologies of division and multiplication.

The recombinant nature of skills in the creative sectors, the necessary dependency on collaborative practice, both produces and is enabled by a common through which other registers of connection and relation are possible. Yet the common in itself offers no guarantees for collaboration. Non-collaboration may just as easily eventuate. Intellectual property regimes simultaneously constitute a technology of division and connection between hackers and vectoralists. But such regimes are just one among many barriers to collaboration and do not easily engender invention. Our argument is that unexpected forms of invention – primarily the instituting of networks – may arise from such constraints as a strategy of refusal. In the case of the hacker, such refusal takes the form of constructing an informational commons through peer-to-peer practices of collaborative constitution and self-organized labour. The transnational element of such practices makes it highly difficult, however, for the creative worker to claim any legal affinity with the citizen-worker whose protection is sedimented in the state form of sovereign power. It's at this point that both connections and distinctions can be made between networks of hackers and migrant labour.

The potential for commonalities across labouring bodies is undoubtedly a complex and often fraught subjective and institutional process or formation. The fractured nature of working times, places and practices makes political organization highly difficult. Where this does happen, there are often ethnic affinities coalesced around specific sectors – here, we are thinking of examples such as the 'Justice for Janitors' movement in the US, a largely Latino immigrant experience of self-organization (see Schneider, 2002). On the other hand, as Xiang Biao (2007) emphasizes in his study of Indian IT 'body shop' workers in Sydney, Australia, the ethnicization of workforces is not necessarily based on pre-existing closely knit networks based on cultural affinities but increasingly predicated on processes of transnationalization and individualization that insert workers into the market as 'free atoms' in the neoclassical sense. The coexistence of seeming contradictions – cultural networks conjoined with processes of individualization – is indicative of the complex of forces that constitute the body of labour as a subject of struggle. In Hong Kong, domestic workers of diverse ethnic and national provenance gather on Sundays within non-spaces such as road fly-overs, under pedestrian bridges and in public parks. The domestics are female workers for the most part, initially from the Philippines with

a new wave of workers in recent years from Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (see Constable, 1999; Law, 2002). And as cultural critic Helen Grace notes, ‘there are also mainland migrant workers with limited rights, working in all sorts of low-paid jobs, moving backwards and forwards and living with great precarity’ (2008).

The domestic workers transform the status of social-ethnic borders by occupying spaces from which they are usually excluded due to the spatial and temporal constraints of labour. Sunday is the day off for domestic workers, and they don’t want to stay at home, nor do their employers wish to have them about the house. The Norman Foster designed headquarters for HSBC bank, located in the city’s Central district, nicely encapsulates the relation between domestic workers and capital and the disconnection between state and citizen. This bank is just one of many instances found globally where the corporate sector makes available public spaces in the constitution of so-called ‘creative cities’. Yet the actions of undocumented workers mark a distinction from the entrepreneurial city and its inter-scalar strategies of capital accumulation in the form of property development and business, financial, IT and tourist services. With a first floor of public space, workers engage in praying and study groups reading the Koran, singing songs, labour organization, cutting hair and dancing while finance capital is transferred in floors above the floating ceiling of the HSBC bank. Used in innovative ways that conflict with or at least depart from how these spaces usually function, there is a correspondence here with what Grace calls a ‘horizontal monumentality’, ‘making highly visible – and public – a particular aspect of otherwise privatized labour and domestic space’ (2007: 469).

Not described in tourist guides and absent from policy and corporate narratives of entrepreneurial innovation and development, the domestic worker is a public without a discourse. For many Hong Kong residents their visibility is undesirable, yet these workers make a significant contribution to the city’s imaginary: their visibility on Sundays signals that the lustre of entrepreneurialism is underpinned by highly insecure and low-paid forms of work performed by non-citizens. The domestic worker also instantiates less glamorous but nonetheless innovative forms of entrepreneurialism. An obvious example here consists of the small business initiatives such as restaurants, delis and small-scale repairs and manufacturing that some migrant workers go on to develop, making way for new intakes of domestic workers in the process and redefining the ethnic composition of the city. Such industriousness provides an important service to local residents and contributes in key ways to the social-cultural fabric of the city.

The competition for urban space – particularly the use of urban space – by the domestic worker also comprises an especially innovative act: the invention of a new institutional form, one that we call the ‘organized network’. The transnational dimension of the domestic workers is both external and internal. External, in their return home every year or two for a week or so – a passage determined by the time of labour and festivity (there is little need for domestics during the Chinese New Year). Internal,

with respect to the composition of the group itself. In this case, there exists ‘a multiplicity of overlapping sites that are themselves internally heterogeneous’ (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2008). Here, we are thinking of the borders of sociality that compose the gathering of domestics in one urban setting or another – as mentioned above, some choose to sing, engage in labour organization, hold study groups, etc. Ethnic and linguistic differences also underscore the internal borders of the group.

Can the example of domestic workers in Hong Kong be understood in terms of a transnational organized network? The domestics only meet in particular times and spaces (Sunday in urban non-spaces). Such a form of localization obviously does not lend itself to transnational connection. Perhaps NGOs and social movements that rally around the conditions of domestic workers communicate within a transnational network of organizations engaged in similar advocacy work. But if this is the case, then we are speaking of a different register of subjectivity and labour – one defined by the option of expanded choice and self-determination. In this sense, we can identify a hierarchy of networks whose incommensurabilities are of a scalar nature: local as distinct from transnational. For domestic workers, much of this has to do with external conditions over which they have little control: Sunday is the day off work, exile from their country of origin is shaped by lack of economic options and the forces of global capital, their status as undocumented or temporary workers prevents equivalent freedom of movement and political rights afforded to Hong Kong citizens, etc. But within these constraints, invention is possible.

### **Translation as Organization**

The last thing we want to do is to sociologize precarity. Doubtless sociological empirics can help us identify different types and experiences of precarity and to array them along an analytical spectrum. Such an approach might provide a prelude to political organization, but it is not, in itself, enough to generate the kind of political invention necessary to be effective in the current conjuncture of neoliberal governance, market regulation, securitization and risk management. We might as well say that precarity cannot be grounded. In other words, precarity is not an empirical object that can be presupposed as stable and contained. It might better be understood as an experience, since unearthing the tonalities of experience requires an approach that does not place an either/or between conceptual and empirical approaches to the world. Rather it requires a constant movement or transposition between the two: an empirical testing of conceptual propositions but also a conceptual questioning of the empiricist’s predilection for the merely evidential. Precarity here does not offer a stable third position. It cannot exist without a transversal or transpositional movement between the theoretical and the practical. Insofar as we are precarious, we are always on the move.

How then to organize through movement? What are the prospects for invention under conditions of restlessness at once imposed and embraced?

If precarity is insufficient to furnish a common cause for subjects arrayed across different industries, jurisdictions and digital divides, what sense is there to speak of the common at all? For us, the answer to these questions lies in the practice of translation. Taiwan-based cultural theorist Jon Solomon defines translation ‘as a mode of social praxis rather than a mode of epistemological mapping’ (2008). Beyond simply a technical procedure of establishing linguistic equivalence through communication (Iveković, 2005; Sakai, 2006), the technics of translation foreground the relational encounter between entities, affective modulations, the visible and invisible, perceptions and imperceptions, communication and the non-communicable. The emphasis is not on one or the other, but rather the movement between coordinates, agents and institutions. Variables such as these acquire their form and habitus through connections made possible by movement. The certainties by which institutions, for instance, might normally be understood as stable identities become substantively more uncertain and insecure when movement is accorded a determining force. Parameters become porous.

Precarity, situated in this transversal manner, is not exclusive to the human or human nature as such, but rather becomes an experience from which differential capacities and regimes of value emerge. If, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue, the demand for flexibility on the part of workers in the 1970s precedes the emergence of labour flexibility as an important form of post-Fordist control, this does not mean that precarity can be bound down to any single set of experiences, social situations, geographical sites or temporal rhythms. One witnesses, in other words, a contest over the semiotic and institutional territory of precarity: the creative worker or activist in Europe, the migrant’s experience of labour and life, the CEO undergoing an existential crisis over repayments on a third holiday home, the policy-maker’s or academic’s affiliation with a discursive meme, the finance market whose fluctuations are shaped by undulating forces, etc. Played out over diverse and at times overlapping institutional fields, the sign and experience of precarity is multiplied across competing regimes of value: surplus value of precarious labour, scarcity value of intellectual property rights, cultural and social values of individual and group identities, legal and governmental values of border control, etc. The translation of precarity across these variables registers the movement of relations.

To the extent that movement configures borders and constitutes limits, politics is understood in the Schmittian friend/enemy schematic where one either wins or loses. But the logic of movement, of transversal relations, also offers an important supplement to this understanding of ‘the political’. Borders become mobilized in new ways, not least because, as Balibar (2004: 109) notes, they no longer coincide simply with the edges or limits of political space but have been ‘transported *into the middle of political space*’. The antagonisms that underlie the encounter with difference unleash a mode of exchange, asymmetrical as that frequently is, where one does not simply win or lose but almost always gains and loses something at the same time.

‘In the best case, translation runs both ways’, writes Rada Iveković, ‘and crosses borders all the time: translation is necessarily transborder’ (2005). How, then, to organize in political ways and institute new forms of cooperation when faced with the seemingly permanent instability instantiated by transborder processes of translation?

The persistence of such unstable conditions suggests that today effective political organization must similarly be composed in transborder ways. Including but not reducible to transnational forms of connection, the movement that underscores transborder organization encompasses subjective, affective, disciplinary, social, economic and cultural relations. Following Sakai (1997: 8), we can understand these relations to harbour new kinds of political possibility when they are predicated on heterolingual modes of address; that is, modes of address that do not ‘abide by the normalcy of reciprocal or transparent communication’ but instead assume ‘that every utterance can fail to communicate because heterogeneity is inherent in any medium, linguistic or otherwise’. As Sakai (2006: 75) explains, this ‘attitude of address’ involves ‘a situation in which one addresses oneself as a foreigner to another foreigner’. At stake is neither alliance-building based on what used to be known as international solidarity nor a struggle for mutual recognition that binds subjects in relations of identity and difference. Rather, connection involves a process of permanent translation.

Let us be clear that we do not see precarity as furnishing a pre-given cause for contemporary labour struggles. In identifying this experience as the norm of capitalist production and reproduction, we do not propose that it can simply merge or sew together experiences of contingency, vulnerability and risk across different historical periods and geographical spaces. Nor do we see translation, even when posited as an interminable process, as a means of collapsing the variations of precarity into some stable, undivided subject position (the working class, the multitude, the precariat, etc.). Translation can be a mode of articulation, but it is also something more than this. Clearly, translation has its scopes and limits. Nobody would deny that some forms of precarity cannot translate into others. But the deeper question concerns how this untranslatability is constituted. As Sakai (1997: 6) notes, untranslatability ‘does not exist before translation: translation is the a priori of the untranslatable’. Only after translation has occurred can we sense what has been translated or transferred. So to identify the untranslatable we must continue to translate.

To think about translation as organization is to come to terms with this predicament. Only by continuing to translate can we discern the limits of translation, and only by operating within these limits can we distinguish the instituting of one network of relations from another. It is within these contours that we can discern the emergence of the common. What we term the organized network, or the instituting of social-technical forms, is predicated on transversal relations that remain contingent and precarious. The common is not given as a fragile heritage to be protected against the ravages of new forms of primitive accumulation and



enclosure. Rather, it is something that must be actively constructed, and this construction involves the creation of ‘subjects in transit’ (Mezzadra, 2007; Sakai, 1997).

Let us take the example of taxi drivers, many of whom are from the Indian state of the Punjab, in the Australian city of Melbourne. In late April 2008, after one of these drivers had been near fatally stabbed in an apparently racist attack, approximately one thousand of these workers assembled to block one of the city’s major intersections for a period of 22 hours. They chanted, removed their shirts in the cold night weather, issued a set of demands to improve their safety and working conditions, refused the directions of police and the ministrations of government, attracted the media spotlight, and caused massive traffic jams and public discontent (Rost, 2008). There are two things that interest us about this event.

First is how the difficulty experienced by police and government in dealing with the blockade surfaced in the claim that the drivers were not organized. ‘They are not an organised group’, declared the relevant public transport minister Lynne Kosky, ‘which is actually very difficult’ (ABC, 2008). Presumably this meant that the group, which had gathered partly as the result of the circulation of SMS messages, was not organized as a trade union with recognizable spokespeople and negotiators. Inspector Steve Beith of the Victoria Police explained:

There doesn’t appear to be any structure or organizers. Every time we try to speak to anybody the shouting and the chants start. It’s very difficult to hear what they’re trying to say. There appears to be different groups with different organizers of those groups. It’s very hard to work out who’s who. (quoted in *Times of India*, 2008)

It is precisely because the drivers did not organize along hierarchical or representative lines that their protest proved so baffling and threatening to the authorities. Clearly, the event was something other than a spontaneous uprising. It was not without ‘structure or organizers’. Rather, the potency of the strike rested on its multiplicity and internal divisions, which remained illegible to the state but instituted a network of relations that, while precarious, brought the city to a halt.

The second thing that interests us about this taxi blockade is the fact that many of the drivers are also international university students. Because most of these students are present in the country on visas that allow them to work only 20 hours a week, they are forced to survive by accepting illegal, dangerous and highly exploitative working conditions. The question thus arises as to whether the blockade should be read as taxi driver politics, migrant politics or student politics. We would suggest that one reason for the effectiveness of the strike (the government, which had only recently refused to negotiate with unions of teachers and health workers, acceded to the drivers’ demands) is the fact that it is all three of these at the same time.

To analyse this event one really needs to consider the transversal relations between these different subject positions. From here proliferates a whole series of questions surrounding issues such as visa and residency regulations, border control, race relations, the structural dependence of the Australian higher education sector on international student fees, the increased precarity of academic labour in this same sector, the role of recruitment agencies in countries like India and China, their links to English-language testing services and so on. The organization of the event itself translates between these different issues and brings them into novel relation. It is not a matter of building lasting alliances between, say, taxi drivers, university students and migrants. Indeed, the very translation at play in the strike reveals untranslatable elements here. That participants in the blockade were simultaneously workers, students and migrants does not mean that these three groups, when constituted separately, share interests, social outlooks or experiences of precarity. Within the moment of protest, however, political possibilities emerge. The organization and political creativity of these ‘subjects in transit’ institute new experiences of the common, which suddenly flash up in political space and then seemingly withdraw into a space of quiet suffering, remaining all the more threatening because they can only be known in, through and for their unpredictability.

The common, in this sense, refuses any straightforward transposition into state politics and cannot be confined within a single channel of political communication. Rada Iveković (2007) offers this example of the incommunicable or untranslatable between supranational articulations of the economy and the national scale of politics:

While economy has turned to a large extent international and transnational, politics is still often expressed in terms of national states and their relations. It means that economic *agencements*, social realities, political claims do not *translate* into the monolithic political sphere.

In the face of such transnational economic arrangements, the regulation school’s interest in the regulation of economic forces by the state and inter-state agencies is a further example of analytical oversight unable to account for the untranslatability of post-Fordist economics into state politics.

This is not to say that the common, in all its possible manifestations, exists outside the ambit of the state. Nick Dyer-Witheford (2006) identifies differing moments in the circulation of the common. These include:

... *terrestrial commons* (the customary sharing of natural resources in traditional societies); *planner commons* (for example, command socialism and the liberal democratic welfare state); and *networked commons* (the free associations [of] open source software, peer-to-peer networks, grid computing and the numerous other socializations of technoscience).

The question is about how these multiple forms of the common come into relation. ‘A twenty-first century communism’, Dyer-Witheford suggests, will

involve their ‘complex unity’ but ‘the strategic and enabling point in this ensemble is the networked commons’, which depend on and even exist in ‘potential contradiction’ with ‘the other commons sectors’. When we talk about organized networks and the transversal but also often conflictual relations that compose them, we have a similar vision in mind. We might even go so far as to say, with Kojin Karatani (2005), that this is the transcendental element of the common, since it is only within the purview of networks that we see the possibility for precarious experiences of translation to become scalable and thinkable at levels from the domestic to the planetary as well as in the interconnections between these levels.<sup>5</sup>

To return to our original remarks: we do not see such processes of composition and transposition as possible without struggle. In the current conjuncture there are struggles not just about the ownership but also about the most basic design and architecture of networks. Only in the context of these struggles do we believe it is possible to claim the organization of networks as the ‘strategic and enabling point’ in the construction of the common. To insert the moment of precarity into these struggles is not to claim that it alone is the concept or experience that translates across different struggles and enables political invention. Indeed, the overburdening of precarity, the expectation that it might bear the load of a common cause, is one reason for its rapid expiry within social movements. Any concept that so quickly monopolizes the political field is bound just as quickly to disappear, or, at least, to acquire merely academic connotations. The remedy to this situation is not necessarily an abandonment of the concept. Precarity as an experience is unlikely to go away. Rather, we have suggested a broadening of the debate and analytical perspective. By working through and across the differential registers and limits of precarity we can recognize that it is the norm – or an aspect of what we have been calling the common – and not the exception.

#### *Notes*

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1. A project in Beijing that we participated in during the summer of 2007 began to investigate conditions and practices overlooked in studies and policy on the creative industries. As a counter-mapping of creative industries, this transdisciplinary project foregrounded practices of collaborative constitution that registered the ‘constitutive outside’ of creative industries (<http://orgnets.net>). Material from this project will be published in a bi-lingual issue of *Urban China* magazine later this year.

2. It may seem unusual to connect migrant workers with creative industries; however, in the case of China (if not elsewhere), migrant labour supplies the creative industries with its primary economy: real-estate speculation predicated on the rapid construction of buildings and infrastructure made possible by cheap migrant labour.

3. On the ‘family wage’, gender, the reproduction of labour and Fordist discipline see May (1982), May and Rothbart (1989) and Lewchuk (1993). Thanks to Angela Mitropoulos for these references. See her blog post entitled ‘Fraternity’ (<http://archive.blogsome.com/2008/04/09/ford-masculinity/>).

4. These arguments derive from a draft book manuscript by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson. For a programme essay see Mezzadra and Neilson (2008).

5. Karatani (2005: 99) distinguishes the transcendental from the transcendent. The latter describes a movement beyond the immanence of this world, while the former describes the underlying structure that precedes and shapes experiences of living in, through and between the transversal relations that compose the world. To think transcendently is to approach ‘the world as a heterogeneous space of *intermundial* intercourse, rather than thinking in the space of a community gathered around a univocal set of rules’.

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