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Mapping Precariousness, Labour Insecurity, and Uncertain
Livelihoods: Subjectivities and Resistance

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Emiliana Armano / Arianna Bove / Annalisa Murgia (Hg.), Mapping Precariousness, Labour Insecurity, and Uncertain Livelihoods: Subjectivities and Resistance

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This book reaches us at a moment when the extraordinary circulation of “precariousness” in public discourse in many parts of the world is inversely related to the movement’s capacity to mobilize collectively against the conditions that brought it into being. Indeed, as the editors argue in their introduction, there is an urgent need for new research trajectories and innovative theoretical-political tools that help us make sense of precariousness today (p. 8). Echoing the editors, contributor Dimitris Papadopoulos notes that there was a moment in 2008 when one cycle of struggle against precarisation that had begun in 2000 suddenly ended with a defeat (p. 138). Contributor Andrew Ross similarly argues that the financial crash in 2008 led to a deepening, perhaps even more radical departure from the status quo ante. Having rendered the contractual relationship even more tenuous than before, the epoch inaugurated by the post-crash recession will force us to “rethink some of the critiques of precarity that emerged before 2008” (p. 189; see also Foti, same volume).

The resulting volume, which is a mix of interviews, fieldwork, ethnography, and content analysis, offers readers a “cartography of experience” that pulls together three clusters of contributions under the headings of “Subjectivities: A Cartography of Experience” (Part I); “Resistance: Social Movements Against Precariousness” (Part II); and “Conceptual Outlooks” (Part III). Ranging from chapters exploring

the violent histories of colonial labor mobilization in Africa (Bar-chiesi) to the pull of “entrepreneurship” for workers in China (Sommer), to precariousness as it unfolds in Japan (Richter), Italy (Armano and Murgia; Foti; Graziano), France (Bureau and Corsani; Mitropoulos), Greece (Spyridakis), Spain (Casa-Cortés and Cobar-rubias; Lorey), Australia (Morgan and Wood), the UK (Southwood), and Romania (Richardson), this volume assembles a vivid set of conversations as they unfold across borders and cut through “multiple contexts, from industrial to class, gender, family relations as well as political participation and citizenship” (Bove, Murgia, and Armano, p. 5). It provides readers with a rich encyclopedia of precariousness as a modality of both subjectivation and counter-subjectivation, politicization and de-politicization.

When it was adopted in 2000 by various sections of the Italian social movement, the term meant to politicize against precarious employment while also transcending the narrow confines of the sociology of work and industrial relations. Instead, activists launched the argument that precariousness had clawed itself into the most intimate recesses of our social fabric, dominating existential realities and demanding new forms of political action. The central innovation here was that precariousness was theorized as a mode of governance that operates far beyond the workplace. We are all working for capital, even when we think we are not working (Armano and Murgia, p. 48; Ross, p. 190). The early 2000s thus saw the birth of a movement that oriented itself around a new fragmented subject and that thought of itself as the successor of the industrial proletariat. The goal was to harness the potential of the “social precariat,” both as class and generation (Foti, p. 151–152).

These insights have moved far beyond the confines of European social movements into academe and institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Union. Such circulations have led to a domestication of the concept, whereby precariousness is often read as the alter ego of the “standard employ-

ment relation” (SER) (Bove, Murgia, and Armano, p. 2). For many, “precariousness” has triggered a “dreaming of security” (Mitropoulos, p. 211) rather than a more radical critique of capitalist command – a command that has always already been constitutively precarious, especially for women and people of color (Lorey, p. 202). We should thus understand Fordist and Keynesian experiments as temporary, bygone exceptions (Barchiesi, p. 16) whose demise could have ushered in a broad social movement dedicated to the radical critique of obsessive productivism and desires for waged work (Bove, Murgia, Armano, p. 3). Instead, as many authors in “Mapping Precariousness” observe, we are confronted with a world of work where precarity seems to have deepened while desires for work intensified, especially now that it has become intimately entangled with our hyper-financialized post-2008 present.

One of the threads that unites all chapters is, as the editors put it, “the accent on subjectivity and how it intersects [with] the ongoing transformation in the experiences and representations of those affected by precariousness” (Bove, Murgia, and Armano, p. 5). In what follows, I discuss this broad unity along three axes – all of which overlap somewhat with the volume’s three parts: I call these three sections Refusal / Desire; Financialization; and Counter-Subjectivation and Recomposition.

Refusal / Desire

“Mapping Precariousness” begins with Franco Barchiesi’s argument that African workers historically opted for contingent and casual labor relations or self-employment as a way to subvert colonial capitalist work routines. African refusal was, Barchiesi shows, an implicit critique of the brutalities of wage labor. A look at precariousness from the vantage point of the global South thus allows us to see that waged work cannot always function “as a putative progressive norm” (p. 19). This does not mean that we should not fight for fair wages and better work conditions everywhere (Foti, p. 153–154), but

that this struggle must always also be linked to a critique of wage work as such. As Valeria Graziano puts it, these are two concomitant struggles that wed a “struggle for the emancipation of labour” to a struggle “for the liberation *from* labour” (Graziano, citing Antonio Negri, p. 159).

In China, waged labor is so unattractive that dreams of entrepreneurship have far surpassed waged work as a desired type of work (Sommer, p. 31). Wages in China have more than doubled since 2005, but 33 percent of these wages are often tied to incentives or composed of variable components that are influenced by business performance. Salaries can thus be quite volatile and barely benefit industrial workers. In light of such wage volatility and difficult working conditions, many Chinese workers dream of gaining some control over their future through entrepreneurialism.

While the volume begins with these two stories of refusal of the wage, the majority of pieces instead explore an overwhelming desire for work (of any kind!) that governs worker-subjectivities in many parts of the world, especially post-2008. Emiliana Armano and Annalisa Murgia show, for example, how the Italian world of “task-oriented” freelancing is organized around hope and promise as forms of governmentality (“I don’t know if they’ll pay me”, p. 51). This is a speculative economy that workers enjoy because of the freedoms it allows, but it is also a world where workers are driven crazy by the future projection of possibly, maybe being paid – often by clients whose friendship one must cultivate. What binds them to these kinds of labor is what the authors call the “passion trap” – an indistinguishability of life and work that leads to “self-precarisation” (p. 52). The crucial questions the authors end with is: “How to mobilize collective social action when the value extraction device merges with the expression of passions, when free work is self-gratifying, when the wage itself is a promise not reality, when professional relationships become intimate and personal?” (p. 57).

Ivor Southwood similarly decries a logic of self-exploitation where workers think of their selves as “assets.” Here, subjection is organized around the desire (or, rather, “aspiration”) to be employable. Life itself has become nothing much more than a “compulsory game of employability, an endless, banal quest to find and keep work” (p. 72). In Romania, many women find work in a call center profoundly desirable; the impossibility to plan life is nothing new here and stretches back to at least the 1980s (Richardson, p. 110). Valeria Graziano, too, laments the “allure of finding individual satisfaction through work as one of the most pressing challenges” (p. 157). This allure is made most strikingly visible in the “reactionary prefigurative practices” one finds in the labor market today. Graziano explores, among other things, the exploding phenomenon of practice firms in Europe; virtual companies supported through public schemes that provide fake jobs, fake routines, fake offices, and fake salaries to unemployed workers. These Potemkian practice firms are organized around the precariat’s “toxic” desire for work; a desire that allows for workers to embrace their “condition of disposability with less sadness” (p. 163).

Financialization

The financial crisis of 2008 saw the emergence of a cycle of struggle (uprisings in Athens, Istanbul, the Arab Spring) that was “hailed as a revolt of the precarious generation” but then suddenly came to a halt in 2014 (Papadopoulos, p. 138). Initially, 2008 seemed like a moment where capitalist profit seeking seemed “thinned and exhausted” (Ross, p. 190). Instead, it turned out that the instability and volatility that characterizes global finance capitalism was not a sign of weakness but the very means through which its power was consolidated (Papadopoulos, p. 143). Indeed, as Mitropoulos puts it, degrees of disorder, randomness, and contingency in the economic system are today not just measured but lauded as necessary and natural – this is, in Hayekian terms, a “spontaneous order” (p. 217) that is designed

to absorb shocks and challenges. Post-2008 power thus “consolidated itself by consolidating financialization” (Papadopoulos, p. 143).

For Papadopoulos, the “externalization of production to the social sphere” therefore means much more than the fact that work has become dispersed and socialized. Rather, value production has become embodied and indistinguishable from individual workers and their everyday lives. Echoing arguments made by Armano and Murgia in the same volume, Papadopoulos suggests that when working people mobilize multiple social and personal investments in order to be able to remain in the labor market, and when they work on social relations, general skills, and the making of personal debts, value production has achieved a kind of visceral ordinariness that has seeped into each and every nervous system – a “biofinancialization” that elevates investment value over any other kind of value. Within this regime, future monetary profit can be gained from potentially any field of life or any kind of environment (p. 140). Workers thus constantly seek to invest in themselves and their environment and relational surrounds; they speculate on almost all aspects of everyday life in order to possibly secure some kind of a future (p. 139–140).

Andrew Ross argues similarly that the post-crash economy is one that transformed what initially appeared as crisis into new opportunities of expansion – turning the quest to extract value from the future into a constant “labor expended in hopes of securing forthcoming awards.” The radical uncertainty of the future is mitigated by workers now pledging their labor upfront (p. 190). Much of this labor “leaves little trace of employment” since it includes the cultivation of relations or is performed for free (through “distributed labor” in social media which is later mined for data, for example, or in the form of the “donor labor” of crowdsourcing, in unpaid internships, prison labor, the “sharing economy,” or via outright wage theft (Ross, p. 196–197)). Indeed, in the period following 2008, Ross argues, analysts in the business press explicitly advised firms to take advantage of sources of free labor that exist far outside of the conventional

workplace (p. 197). What followed was a “carnal orgy of contemporary biofinancialization’s feasting on the everyday life and the commons” that has put a halt to the possibility of freedom and justice (Papadopoulos, p. 145). Universities, at the same time, have also often become profoundly de-politicized spaces—a de-politicization that has gone hand in hand with the neoliberalization of its administration and the casualization of its workforce. Universities are thus themselves both profoundly precarious work places as well as nothing much more than “temporary camps for chronically jobless youth” (Richter, p. 125). There is thus little space or time for autonomous organization, no option to give up work in its “embodied configuration” (Papadopoulos, p. 141–142).

Counter-Subjectivation and Recomposition

Yet some of the authors insist on moments of counter-subjectivation and recomposition even in an era where precarization has become totally “democratized,” that is to say, generalized across the social fabric (Richter, p. 128). For Armano and Murgia, one finds such small zones precisely in the widening terrain of non-standard employment, where counter-subjective experimentation, disaffection, and withdrawal do exist alongside and against the dominant mode of value extraction. For these two authors, the process of growing inequalities and the growing margins of autonomy are interrelated (p. 47). Contributors Bureau and Corsani similarly argue that these zones of experimentation exist precisely within work arrangements that were originally developed in the wake of neoliberal employment policies. Analyzing the rise of “Business and Employment Cooperatives” (BEC; whereby budding entrepreneurs are supported within cooperative settings, benefit from a secure income, and can eventually become full cooperative members), they show how these neoliberal cooperative forms certainly function as a vehicle of governmentality through precarization. But they simultaneously also operate as political laboratories for experimentation, opening up tentative hori-

zons of emancipation beyond salaried work and individual entrepreneurship (p. 61–63). What Bureau and Corsani found was a “refusal of hierarchical relationships” and a “refusal of individual self-employment” – small “resistance zones” within the neoliberal fabric (p. 72).

Spyridakis, likewise, found a slowly recomposing social body of Greek media workers—a body that emerged as they occupied their former workplace in the hope of regaining the wages their employer owed them. What they got, instead, was a rediscovered collectivity that emerged through collective assembly (p. 99). Isabel Lorey describes strands of Spanish feminist activism that hinge on attempts to recompose the broken social body through the insistence that emancipation need no longer be imagined as liberation from precariousness. Indeed, even as the possibility of experiencing precariousness as a commonly shared vulnerability barely exists because precariousness has had a tragically individualizing effect (Lorey, p. 204), projects such as the “care citizenship” (*ciudadanía*) practiced by feminist activists hinge on a search for precarious life in common. Here, precariousness is taken as a foundational condition that demands relationality and care.

Such prefigurative techniques of re-orienting desires and collective selves are, as Graziano notes, profoundly important and differ radically from the kinds of politics practiced in traditional left-wing organizations (p. 157). But they do raise the question of how to link broader political strategy to everyday practice. The difficulty of doing so is well demonstrated by Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias who, in their search for a politics that hinges on precarity-in-common show how difficult it is to build alliances across multiple precarious lives. Indeed, such attempts at building collective movements are hindered by the fact that precariousness unfolds differentially—and through very different modalities of violence—across differently raced (often violently policed) and classed bodies. Such radical differences simply cannot be flattened out, even as efforts to build solidarity across difference persist (p. 181).

Is the precariat-as-political-force at its end, then, or is it in fact turning to the left as it aligns itself increasingly with the political renewal occurring, for example, in Spain, Greece, Portugal (Foti, p. 154)? Time will tell. For now, one of the main questions I am left with after reading this rich collection is how a radical politics can be crafted if one of the major effects of the post-2008 crash has been a durable transformation of the very idea of the future as such.

Andrea Muehlebach

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