

The two endings of the precarious movement

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Abstract

In 2008, just as the movement against precarity seemed to win political battle after political battle, the ‘war against precarisation’ was suddenly lost. The cycle of struggles of the precarious that began in 2000 had come to an end. Ironically this was also the moment popular media and academia discovered the term precarity and turned it to a sociological category and to a synonym for insecurity. This chapter focusses on the events of 2008 to investigate the connection between precariousness and financialisation and how it informed the movement’s response to the financial crisis, its demise and its subsequent incarnations.

Bio

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The year 2000 was the year of the precarious movement. The actions of *Stop précarité* and *AC! Agir ensemble contre le chômage et la précarité* in Paris, the initiatives of the group *Chainworkers Crew* in Italy and then the first *MayDay* parade in Milan in 2001 kick started the trans-European movement of the precarious, a movement of movements, an ecology of events autonomously organised outside the traditional trade unions and the established radical left.¹ And so the term precarity entered our vocabulary. For several years the movement was growing, putting pressure both on trade unions as well as political parties and public opinion to recognise the proliferation of precarity, and to act. Simultaneously organised in many European cities, *EuroMayDay* parades, were powerful actors within this wide ecology of campaigns, direct actions, small and big self-organised events, militant research and media interventions.²

This was a transnational and transversal ecology connecting precarity to other divergent social movements and mobilisations across many different locations in Europe. The precarious movement was never just a protest campaign against precarity and the dismantling of welfare provision. Nor was it only a voice against the new configuration of exploitation with the proliferation of atypical, casual and insecure employment. The precarisation of work was the starting point for the movement. But precarity was not just about work. It was about the precarisation of life along many different fields: housing, womens' rights, education, health, social rights, culture, mobility and migration. And then in addition to this expanded understanding of precarisation, precarity had another, even more important, affective and imaginary connotation within the movement: the hope that the exit from the old system of employment and welfare provision could open the search for a better life. Precarity was considered simultaneously a new system of exploitation and a practice of liberation from the previous system of exploitation.³ The energy and ingenuity of the precarious movement have their source in this ambivalent and multi-layered understanding of precarity.⁴

In a moment when the movement seemed to win one battle after the next the 'war against precarisation' was suddenly lost. It was probably 2008. The cycle of struggles of the precarious that had started, at least formally, in 2000 had come to an end. Ironically the moment the 'war' was lost is also the moment popular media as well as academia discovered the term precarity and turned it to a synonym for insecurity or to a sociological category and a social theory concept.⁵ What happened in 2008? I will only try to sketch some preliminary thoughts as a sustained reflection on the history of the movement and its political as well as organisational legacy in not possible at this moment; there is no account and interpretation of this period produced through militant research and coming from inside the movement itself.

2008 seems to be a turning point in many respects. There is the eruption of the economic crisis and there is also the begin of a new cycle of social movement struggles. Each one of these events takes place on various scales and involves a multiplicity of actors making it almost impossible to discern a direct impact on the precarious movement. But there is affectively as well as conceptually something happening in 2008 that did not allow the mobilisations of the precarious to continue as before. There is a sense in the air that something has radically changed. One would expect that the economic crisis would strengthen the movement of the precarious. This was not the case: The thrust of the

movement was not enough to confront the effects of the economic crisis and the response of the European elites to financial collapse.

The December 2008 uprising in Athens was an event that absorbed the energy of the previous autonomous precarious movement to create an actor that was positioned vis-à-vis social order at large not just precarity. As the economic crisis was engulfing the whole of European societies so also the social movements. The wave of events that followed--from the Arab Spring and Spain's 15M to Gezi Park in Istanbul--all were hailed as a revolt of the precarious generation. Unlike the previous mobilisations of the precarious though, these events were addressing much broader issues than precarity itself. This second cycle of struggles that started in 2008 seems to have come to an end in 2014. It may have propelled a wave of extraordinary transformations that I will discuss later in this essay but as a social movement it is unclear whether it will continue.

Embodying Value Production

Current social movements have their roots in the ways social and political power was reorganised as a response to the contentious mobilisations of the working classes and subaltern populations of the 1960s and 1970s. These struggles transformed gradually and diversified through the 1980s and 1990s to a multiplicity of social conflicts: from migrant mobilisations, feminist struggles and social rights campaigns to ecological movements and global justice initiatives. We see two main transformations unfolding as a response to these mobilisations: stagnant wages, underemployment and the flexibilisation of labour markets as well as finance-led accumulation with the introduction of securitisation and increased consumer, corporate and sovereign lending. Let's start with labour.

One of the key components of these transformations is the externalisation of production from the workplace to the social sphere. This does not mean that the site of value production is transferred 'outside' living labour. Activities that people perform as part of their non-work life or secondary activities of their work life become directly productive. More importantly though it also means that working people mobilise multiple social and personal investments in order to be able to remain in the labour market (e.g. social relations, general skills, making personal debts, informal networks, ideas, their subjectivity, their mobility, their health, their self-organised structures for cooperation, their potential for development).⁶ The epicentre of value production is the workplace, but it is only the epicentre. If we would focus on the workplace only we would miss the important and sometimes defining broader conditions in which work and employment take place. And these broader conditions together with the precarisation of work were at the focus of the precarious movement.

The extended mode of value production does not mean that work becomes simply dispersed and socialised, that it moves outside the singular worker. It rather means that value production becomes embodied: it becomes an indissoluble characteristic of the whole situated social existence of each singular worker.⁷ The situated and embodied quality of work includes all things and artefacts that constitute the worlds in which we exist, our social relations as well as the broader networks of the commons that we rely on to maintain everyday life. In order to be able to survive precarious work one has to rely on and mobilise a

wide array of relations, tricks, people and infrastructures that are only indirectly connected to the actual labour process.

Control over embodied production⁸ is taking place along several lines that attempt to cut across and appropriate this existential continuum of people: first, the attempt to measure labour-power and to quantify it despite the fact that it mobilises the whole embodied conditions of life;⁹ second, the expropriation of the infrastructures of cooperation through property rights, patents and the re-privatisation of access to and circulation of information;¹⁰ third, the individualisation of the costs of social reproduction and privatisation of those forms of social reproduction that cannot be taken up by the individual;¹¹ fourth, the transformation of citizenship to a tool for creating various tiers of working people whose degree of exploitation depends on their varied access to citizenship rights.¹² One could say that all these lines break the horizontal and continuous lived experience of working people and create some form of separate vertical segments that are the productive motor of current precarious work and life conditions.

Biofinancialisation

The other side to the responses to the crisis of the 1970s is the financialisation of the economy. Financialisation is not just an economic strategy; it is culture. Not only because it came to pervade the everyday¹³ but also because it contributed to the consolidation of an ever expanding culture of translating disparate judgements about value to financial measurements. The underlying logic of this culture is that the worth of goods, things, activities and spaces can be essentially translated into financial evaluations. Although different scales of evaluation are by definition incommensurable¹⁴ the predominance of the culture of valuation in Global North societies presupposes and promotes that the worth of almost everything--including the present and future appreciation of assets, goods, services, intangibles, the health and subjective capacities of individuals, the physical environment, human artefacts, other species, urban space--is in principle transferable into one single logic of financial value that is potentially tradable in the market. This is biofinancialisation: the financialisation of everyday life, subjectivity, ecology and materiality.¹⁵

Financial value is here used to express the primacy of investment value over other values (aesthetic, use, moral, ecological, material, cultural) that predominantly assess the future monetary profit to be gained from potentially any field of life or the environment.¹⁶ The principle of investment value hinges upon the belief that the future is exploitable. Future value is by definition unpredictable and in order to be realized the actors involved need to experiment, to manage conflicting information and to create knowledge in action.¹⁷ Future value and investment value are recombining other forms of value into a process of uncertainty.¹⁸

One can see for example how this logic shapes the role time plays in precarious workers' subjectivities: how these workers 'invest' in 'themselves' by shaping their current activities according to the possible future gains in unstable labour markets.¹⁹ At the core of this temporal form of regulation of precarity is the increase of precarious contracts. That is non-standard contract forms based on different configurations between the length and

stability of the working contract (from permanent contracts, to fixed-term contracts, to informal or free/unpaid labour) and the working-time arrangements (from full time employment, to part time employment, to irregular working patterns).²⁰ The less stable and regular the working contract is, the higher the degree of atypicality and the intensity of precarity. As contracts become increasingly insecure exploitation is maintained through the break of the bond of the contract, rather than through the contract itself. This results in an amplification of dependency and the 'exploitation of the self' (Ehrenstein, 2006): one is under increased pressure to ensure that one's future capacity to be 'productive' will be compatible with the demands of the market (lifelong learning, continuous acquisition of skills, entrepreneurial innovation are keywords in this process). One is not only exploited in the present but also one's future is exploited: one's own potentials, what one might become.

But beyond this immediate point of contact between precarity and the uncertainty of the underlying culture of valuation there is an even stronger link between the regulation of precarity and the financialisation of life. Uncertainty is managed by speculating on almost all aspects of everyday life: openly and commonly used infrastructures (information channels, collaboratively produced knowledge, cultural networks), the material commons as well as structures of cooperation, everyday sociality and exchange between producers and consumers. Biofinancialisation traverses the whole continuum of everyday life. Precarious life and work are regulated through an infinite array of devices that evaluate and provide tools for managing precarious existence.

The First Ending

The main political response²¹ to this situation circulating in the precarious movement was some kind of revival of the autonomous politics²² of the 1970s and 1980s, in particular the refusal of work and the self-organisation of social reproduction: an exit from work and the subtraction from labour towards activities that lie outside capitalist valorisation and the organisation of immediate social life outside of formal public services or private provision.²³ But when biofinancialised value production becomes literally embodied in the very existence of working people, as argued earlier, these political alternatives seem almost impossible. Production no longer operates through an externality between the subject and her work, but through accumulation of the embodied totality of one's own existence. Equally, large scale self-organised social reproduction in the sense that has been described in places outside the metropolises of the Global North seems an untenable political scenario simply because it is impossible to give up work in its embodied configuration in order to free space for a complete self-organisation of social reproduction.

Bifo delivers an intriguing description of the mixture of everyday life and the biofinancial regime, but his vision that 'autonomy is the independence of social time from the temporality of capitalism' (2009, p. 75) does not seem to hold against the carnal orgy of contemporary biofinancialisation's feasting on the everyday life and the commons. One cannot say as an expression of autonomy today 'I don't *want* to go to work because I *prefer* to sleep'. The refusal of work is impossible not only *de facto*--that is because work is indissoluble from the body of working people, animals and things--but also because it is not

desired: verticalised value production has become the condition for maintaining everyday existence within the social order.

We can exist and make a life only through the biofinancialised bodies we have. One can only say 'I no longer *can* work' and be punished, as Bifo (2011) so aptly describes, with stigma, panic, depression and the deactivation of one's own capacity for empathy. But neither can empathy be infused to the social body nor panic and stigma just simply extracted from it, as if they are external to it; neither Prozac nor poetry, neither Ritalin nor mindfulness are enough to do this--they inhabit the social body and when they move from one individual body to the next, they leave their traces on them, they mark life for ever.

Biofinancialisation, or rather the realisation of its unstoppable pervasiveness, put a halt to the possibility of freedom and justice that was so crucial for the success of the precarious movement. I have mentioned in the beginning of this essay that the precarious movement did not only embody a cry against precarity (that is both the precarisation of work and the precarisation of life) but also a vision for a better life outside the instituted social provision and the Fordist labour arrangement. Precarity for the precarious movement was not just a new configuration of exploitation but also a political project of justice and liberation. Biofinancialisation directly attacked the feasibility of this political project and simultaneously consolidated the first dimension of precarity as a new spreading configuration of exploitation. The economic crisis and the response to it 2008 made this tenacious grip more obvious than ever. The precarious movement lost its ground. Financialisation is culture because it came to dominate our imaginary to such an extent that wide segments of society believe that even social justice can be fought for with financial means. Financialisation is not ideology; it is as real as something can be: engrained in the everyday ontology of life.

This made apparent that precarity could not be considered as something that can be addressed as a single separate issue. Rather it should be considered as something that is embedded in the broader system of biofinancialised societies. A precarious movement focussing primarily on precarious issues was not only not possible but it was also not enough. In order for the movement to exist it had to scale up its politics. It had to target the political-financial system as such. But the movement that created the 2000-2008 cycle of struggles was not theoretically, practically and organisationally prepared for this kind of conflict. This was the first ending of the precarious movement that saw precarity as its main target and at the same time source of imagination and freedom.

The Second Ending

But a new cycle of struggles began. Starting from the Athens uprising in 2008²⁴ the unexpected cycle of struggles that followed in the next five years addressed the totality of new situation: widespread university occupations and the so called 'anomalous wave' in Italy and other countries in 2008-09, Arab Spring, 15M movement in Spain, Syntagma 2011 in Athens, the Occupy movement, the 'stop evictions' and housing campaigns such as the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) in Spain, Gezi Park in Istanbul, and so forth. Perhaps there are also some links between the London riots of 2011 and these mobilisations. The precarious stepped up their game. The movements of this second cycle of struggles developed an

understanding of themselves as able to create an alternative form of life that had the capacity to articulate a full scale negation of power: 'They do not represent us' is the central motto of this cycle of struggles. The critique of representationalism was always in the heart of the precarious movement since its beginning and throughout the first cycle of struggles. Now it becomes something more than a theoretical assumption and an organisational principle: it becomes a widespread everyday perception.

The long term effects of this cycle of struggles are probably still unknown but their immediate impact was very different than what the movements have intended. Instead of creating a situation that would force instituted power to reconstitute itself and respond to the pressures of the movement, power consolidated the role of financialisation as the main way for managing conflict in European societies. This caught us by surprise. While biofinancialisation was considered up to this point as the heart of the problem now it turned to be the instrument deployed to solve or ameliorate problems. It became obvious that the instability of biofinancial societies 'has nothing to do with any presumed instability per se of the mechanisms of the financial system; quite the contrary, the ambition of those mechanisms is precisely to absorb shocks and to smooth out discontinuities in the economic cycle' as Moulner (2012, p. 152) puts it. Thus the instability and the conflicts that emanate from the precarious organisation of life and labour are not intensified by the indeterminacy of the culture of valuation, rather the opposite is the case: cultures of valuation becomes the main tool through which conflict in value production is regulated (and potentially also contested). The pervasiveness of the culture of valuation with the crucial indeterminacy of value that lies at the core of this culture is the main way to control the outputs of work in the intensified mode of production and, simultaneously, also serves as the vehicle which working people themselves deploy to modify and change their position in the social nexus.

The effect of biofinancialisation is not only that it created the ground for a new phase of expansion (and crisis) but also that with the culture of valuation it created a tool for managing the conflicts that traverse embodied value production. It is through biofinancialisation and more broadly the culture of valuation that specific segments of the working classes as well as the elites and the middle classes maintain and strengthen their position in the social order. The lack of significant opposition to austerity and the meagre responses to the crisis is not only imposed by the elites but also desired by segments of the working and middle classes. The effect of this is double: firstly, a turn to the right and a conservative social, political and cultural backlash in many European countries; secondly, the annihilation of many social democratic parties and of social democratic ideology.

Paradoxically the movements of this second cycle of struggles that have been operating against representation as an organising practice and as a political maxim found themselves in the vortex of the formation of a new wave of political representation in many European contexts. As the motto 'They do not represent us' was echoing across the squares and the net a demand for political representation was forming. One possible reason that allowed such a demand for formal political representation to emerge was the vacuum that was left behind by the demise of the European centre ground and of the social democratic parties and was increasingly filled by the voice of the movements. Generational issues might have also played a role: the generation that grew up within the first and second cycle of struggles felt that they should have a say in this new situation characterised by the consolidation of

conservatism on the one hand and the absence of any progressive or left politics on the other. New forms of organisation²⁵ and in particular the convergence of technology and politics²⁶ facilitated the expression of this collective demand for entering into representational politics. 2015: Syriza in Greece, Barcelona en Comú, Ganemos Madrid, Podemos in Spain, the popularity of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, the success of the Scottish National Party all scattered indications how this second cycle of struggles has fuelled a very different political change than it has originally intended. The close contact of the precarious to instituted power in 2015 signalled the second ending of the precarious movement. The cycle of struggles that started in 2008 comes to an end; the movement disappears again. And the issue it addressed is still with us.

Notes

¹ See Precarias a la deriva (2004) and also: Cosse (2008), Fumagalli (2015), Hamm (2011), Mattoni (2008), Mattoni and Doerr (2007), Murgia and Selmi (2012), Shukaitis, Graeber, and Biddle (2007), Tari and Vanni (2005).

² For an extended collection of many voices on the precarious movement see Murgia and Armano (2012a, 2012b).

³ For an in depth discussion of many of these issues see Precarias a la deriva (2004).

⁴ This is the reason why reductionist definitions of precarity as a structural feature of labour markets in the current regime of production and accumulation--however topical they might be, see for example Standing (2011) and McKay, Jefferys, Paraksevpoulou, and Keles (2012)--miss the point of the precarious movement and strip precarity of its real social and political transformative potentials. Already in Tsianos and Papadopoulos (2006) we have discussed these appropriations of the idea of precarity and its transformation to a sociological and governmental category for managing insecure employment. For a discussion of some of these issues see also van der Linden (2014), Waterman, Mattoni, Humphrys, Cox, and Esteves (2012) and Raunig (2007).

⁵ For example, in social and cultural theory see Gill and Pratt (2008), in industrial relations see Milkman and Ott (2014), in work and employment see Simms (2015). Probably the most problematic of all is the work of Savage et al. (2013) who took the concept without any attention to its situated history within social struggles and local experiences and emptied it from all its meaning.

⁶ The mobilisation of various aspects of one's own life in order to be able to work has been explored in many different settings, see for example Ehrenstein (2012), Ross (2009), Brophy and Peuter (2007), Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011).

⁷ See Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos (2008).

⁸ This is what Lorey (2015) calls governmental precarization.

⁹ See for example De Angelis and Harvie (2009).

¹⁰ For further discussion see Boyle (2010), Bollier (2008), Brophy and Peuter (2007).

¹¹ For further discussion see Weeks (2011), Barbagallo and Federici (2012).

¹² See for example Alberti (2011) and Anderson (2010).

¹³ See Martin (2002); also Bryan and Rafferty (2006), Langley (2008).

¹⁴ See for example Barbier and Hawkins (2012); Beckert and Aspers (2011); Karpik (2010); Moeran and Pedersen (2011); Stark (2009); Zelizer (1979).

¹⁵ For different understandings of biofinancialisation that have influenced the position presented in this paper see French and Kneale (2012), Fumagalli (2011), Marazzi (2010), Martin (2002), Murphy (2013).

¹⁶ See for example the insightful research of Kortright (2012) on transgenic rice and how the promise of a high yielding crop shapes geopolitics, agro-food investments, research and experimental labour. In earlier work (Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 107ff.) we called this the 'formation of emergent life, that is the attempt to develop means for the maximum control of life and to exploit life's emergent qualities in highly uncertain conditions'.

¹⁷ For different accounts on these practices see Smith (1999) and Stark (2009).

¹⁸ On the political implications of the regulation of uncertainty see Lorey (2015).

¹⁹ See Papadopoulos et al. (2008).

²⁰ For an extended discussion see McKay et al. (2012).

²¹ The other one is labour organizing. Trade Unions have been for too long obsessed with full time employment and it was only the pressure of precarious movement in its various expressions (and of course the dramatic decline of the influence of trade unions) that made them more sensible to precarity (Milkman & Ott, 2014). The effect of this focus on full time employment is the segregation between different types of workers (which also involves a segregation between migrant workers and indigenous workers, see Alberti, Holgate, and Tapia (2013).

²² Autonomy refers to the idea that social conflicts and social movements drive social transformation instead of just being a mere response to (economic and social) power. A position which primarily reversed the idea that capital is the driving force of change; instead workers' refusal and insubordination force capital to reorganise itself (Cleaver, 1992; Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Negri, 1988). This perspective on autonomy is of course limited to the relation between capital and labour but the question of autonomous politics exceeds this relation. In the wake of the new social movements that emerged from the Zapatista encuentros and the Seattle mobilisations in the mid/end of the 1990s autonomy is explored in relation to technoscience, culture, feminist politics, and the struggles for the commons (Bifo Berardi, 2009; Böhm, Dinerstein, & Spicer, 2010; Dinerstein, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2012, 2014). Autonomy in this sense produces an excess of practices and social spaces that 'opens up frontiers of resistance and change towards radical practices, an equal society and self-organization' (Böhm et al., 2010, p. 28). On the idea of excess see Free Association (2011) and Papadopoulos et al. (2008).

²³ Regarding autonomous politics see originally Tronti (2005), also Bowring (2002), Cleaver (1992), Weeks (2011, p. 96ff.), Fleming (2012). Regarding subtraction see for example Hardt and Negri (2009) call for a subtraction of labour power from capital or Holloway (2010) tries to make the case that our alternative doing can be outside and *against* abstract labour (that is labour that produces capitalist value) and a discussion in Bowring (2004).

²⁴ See Papadopoulos, Tsianos, and Tsomou (2011).

²⁵ See for example Nunes (2012) and Free Association (2011).

²⁶ On the technopolitics of some of the movements of this second cycle of struggles see Ghelfi (2015).

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