Recomposing precarity: Notes on the laboured politics of class composition

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In *Precarious rhapsody* (2009) Franco 'Bifo' Berardi argues that autonomous political movements in Italy in 1977 marked an important turning point in moving beyond modernity with its concomitant trends of progressive modernisation and class conflict as the driving motor of social transformation. Putting aside the epochal claims contained in this claim it is interesting to reflect on the role played by the notion of precarity in this description[1]. Berardi describes a moment in February 1977 when at the occupation of the University of Rome the head of the Communist Party, while attempting to give a speech, was thrown off campus by the students. Rejecting the party's politics, in particular its almost exclusive focus on the wage earning industrial working class, the students shouted, 'we are all precarious'. Berardi concludes that the students did not realise how correct they were. Over the subsequent years precarity has moved from what was then considered a marginal phenomenon, and one which was often held to be quite desirable (as a form of escape from the dictates of permanent wage labour in industry), to a much more central dynamic of neoliberal labour markets. Post-war social welfare programs were rolled back, and the presumed stability of employment has been undercut by massive increases in what used be referred to as 'non-standard' forms of work such as temporary contracts and project based work. Similarly, in more recent years, the question of precarity has moved from one of marginal importance to a much more debated area w ithin political and theoretical debates.

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[1] The protest movement that Berardi describes in some ways seems quite similar to the tactics and approach of the recent occupation movements (or of the global justice movement) in a rejection of fixed party structures, a focus on joyful convergences in the streets, and a heavy focus on media politics.

While in the English speaking world precarity more or less disappeared from the lexicon during the 1980s, it re-emerged in the late 1990s as sections of the anti-globalisation movement turned to it as a catalyst for developing a new radical politics of everyday life. Since then it has risen in status as an area of academic inquiry and research, from a point only several years ago where a declared interest as an area of research could be met with the objection 'that's not a word' to a slew of new publications as well as seminars and conferences funded by impressively acronym-ed research bodies[2]. Over the past year income inequality has been put back on the political agenda. But if today we are really all precarious, what does that tell us about what it means to be precarious? What conceptual or political clarity is brought to bear by the concept? What I want to argue in this review essay and provocation is that there is an ambivalence located in the core of precarity as a concept. It is a tension between precarity as a strategic, political concept emerging from the autonomist and post-workerist traditions of politics, and a more sociological or empirical focus on precarity as condition to be investigated. This tension sometimes plays out in productive ways, and at other times risks emptying the concept of meaning through being too open, too undetermined. To explore this tension I will look at two recent books that take up and develop the notion of precarity, albeit in somewhat different ways: first the recent work of Guy Standing, who approaches precarity coming out of a background of international NGO politics and advocacy of basic income, and then through the recent writings of Franco Barchiesi, who approaches precarity through of framework of labour historiography and inquiry closer to the concept's political roots.

Enter the precariat

First let's turn to *The precariat,* which as a work of social theory has taken the idea of precarity from the pages of anarchist magazines and into the pages of *The Guardian.* Standing works at the University of Bath and for years previously worked at the ILO. His previous research focused on questions of work and the advocacy of basic income, as well as questions of security, welfare and

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2   To list just a few of the more notable ones: Ross (2009), Gill and Pratt (2008), Raunig et al. (2011). Previously activist publications dedicated issues to examining precarity including Greenpepper Magazine (2004), Mute Magazine (2005, 2006), and fibreculture (2005). In terms of militant research on precarity it is important to point towards the Precarity Web Ring, which is mostly now defunct (http://precarity-map.net) and the activities of the Precarious Workers Brigade (http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com). Funding bodies that have started to fund research on precarity include the ESRC and the Carolina Asia Center. These examples are only some of the more obvious ones I'm aware of, there are surely far more currently existing.

citizenship. For better and worse this colours his approach to precarity. While his long-term experience with international labour organizing and NGO politics reduces the risk of seeing political developments as completely new and unprecedented, he is thus able to connect the areas he investigates with longer standing political questions. But this background also tends to lead Standing to approach precarity from an angle that departs from its political origins, although it is debatable whether that is necessarily a negative condition.

For Standing the precariat is primarily a class in the making. In perhaps more familiar Marxist terms it is a class in-itself but not yet one for-itself. And this is the crux of the political problem for Standing: what if the becoming of this incipient class does take the trajectory hoped for or desired? The word itself, precariat, is formed by combining precarity and the proletariat, but the combination of those words does not necessarily mean that its trajectory will take the same path or direction of the working class (although the development of working class politics frequently veers from outcomes that are expected of it by economists, party theorists, and union organizers alike). Standing's main concern is flagged up in the subtitle as the idea of the precariat as the *new dangerous class*, which is to say precarity as a condition that has more in common with the *Lumpenproletariat* than the traditional working class. The precariat is the global result of several decades of neoliberalism, with its constant calls for increasing the 'flexibility' of labour marks, i.e. outsourcing increased levels of risk and uncertainty on to workers and their families. It is a condition that embeds insecurity across social status levels. For Standing the defining characteristic is its lacks of job-related security, more so than the particular status accorded to the form of labour. This is the prime concern for Standing: precarity not just as a condition of labour today, but how the development of the precariat, which does not correspond to traditional political or class categories, can lead to political energies and developments that are not containable within a pluralist-liberal framework.

Standing orients his project around several key questions about the precariat: What is it? Why should we care about its growth? Why is it growing? Who is entering it? And where is the precariat taking us (2011: vii)? All of these are key questions, and Standing rightly points out that it is the last that is the most pressing. Standing argues that if the becoming-class form is not given a form of political expression and experience of agency it could exhibit a very real tendency to support reactionary, regressive political formations, which he characterises as a 'politics of inferno'. Against this he juxtaposes an argument for forging a new, mildly utopian form of politics, which he calls 'a politics of paradise' (although it sounds a bit like a reworked version of social democracy) to be taken up by politicians and civil society actors. But Standing is too clever, and sensible, to

simply fall back on the idea of reviving a social democratic agenda, or to invoke calls to civil society without appreciating the limitations they contain.

Standing uses a definition and understanding of the precariat roughly similar with how the concept has been developed within autonomous politics and organizing, but also expands upon it. Standing argues that there are two basic ways of defining what is meant by the precariat, namely, either as a distinctive socio-economic group, functioning along the lines of a Weberian ideal type category that can be mobilised for empirical work (and thus stated whether someone is or isn't in the precariat based upon a set of given criteria), and secondly as a political concept that fuses together a conception of precarity today with a class politics[3]. Throughout the book Standing moves back and forth between these two concepts, very much as such is often done in existing discussions about precarity. Standing expands his understanding of the precariat by defining it not in terms of class standing, but also class characteristics that go beyond an immediate position in the labour process. He argues the precariat is defined by these class characteristics, such as having minimal trust relationships with capital or the state, which makes it quite different from the position of what he refers to as the 'salariat' (people with higher degrees of job, economic, and social security, typically paid an annual salary rather than more contingent forms of wage-based income). The precariat experiences few trusting human relationships, particularly work-based ones. Standing argues that this is not simply the rolling back of social welfare programs developed within this century, but rather the undermining of the trust that has evolved in long-term communities and their institutional frameworks. Infinite levels of flexibility do not just threaten job security, but 'jeopardise any sense of cooperation or moral consensus' (2011: 22).

Standing identifies how those finding themselves in precarious positions are caught within a situation which is increasingly hard to escape from, a 'precarity trap' that is intensified by erosion of community support: 'being in and out of temporary low-wage jobs does not build up entitlement to state or enterprise benefits, the person exhausts the ability to call on benefits provided by family and friends in times of need' (*ibid.*: 49). When the labour market becomes increasingly precarious, it produces negative effects in terms of time and income

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3   For Standing the precariat has a 'truncated status' in the sense that it does not correspond to the previous social position of the proletariat where 'labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states', and does not map neatly on to any craft occupation status (2011: 8). In this sense Standing picks up on the popular discussions of precarity that use it to characterise not just labour conditions, but the growing uncertainty of conditions of life in late neoliberalism.

for those at the margins, including the expectations and demands of those who are the beneficiaries of social support measures that trap them in marginal positions. This provides an important counter argument to the idea that those who are out of work 'simply need to get a job' or that there are sufficient forms of social support available for those finding themselves kicked to the increasingly casualised sectors of the economy. A scepticism to taking a job, any available job, far from being the irrational attitude of 'job snobbery' appears much more sensible when taking into account that those taking up temporary jobs tend to lower annual incomes and longer-term earning than whose who manage to weather unemployment longer for a better suited and better paying position.

For Standing this is especially a problem given that the public sector, which traditionally had been a bastion of stability, or at least higher levels of security or decent standards for labour, 'is fast being turned into a zone of flexibility in which the precariat can grow' (*ibid.*: 54). But the answer to this predicament is not simply more forms of job training or skills enhancement, which would traditionally be the fall back of a left liberal politics. Standing points out that for the precariat, finding itself in the thick of developments of technological and communicative labour, there is an 'acceleration of occupational obsolescence' where 'the more trained you are, the more likely you are to become unskilled in your sphere of competence' (*ibid.*: 124). Thus it is a problem of not just being as good as you were yesterday, but of having to constantly adjust to new standards of performance and expanding or shifting skill sets. This is why, paradoxically, 'long-term employment can deskill' (*ibid.*: 17) rather than be a space for the development of employees more highly valued for their experience. This condition can lead to varied reactions, from a frenzy of activity trying to upgrade skills or a feeling of dread because any course of action seems likely to fail eventually. Regardless of the response, Standing very justifiably points out that this creates something of an existential crisis for those who call for more training to address a lack of skills as the cause of economic insecurity, arguing that this 'is not a social climate conducive to capability development; it is one of constant dissatisfaction and stress' (*ibid.*: 124).

In this way Standing describes how precarity is not simply a contractual matter of job conditions, but a broader question where the intensification of labour through technological means and communication changes the very nature of the social fabric such that it is increasingly difficult to feel secure in any position. Precarity moves from a marginal concern sitting at the edge of the economy to one of itself defining features. In this way he seems to echo the arguments of Bifo (2009), who suggests that forms of immaterial labour and knowledge work, which have been much celebrated by the business press and autonomist theorists, have pathological side effects that prevent the emergence of a new form

of politics adequate to the current situation. For Bifo it is the lack of a common space of engagement, outside of the overwhelming flows of data and information, which prevents the emergence of new political compositions. Likewise Standing argues that the overwhelming levels of technological permeation tend to encourage a short term approach, which for the precariat 'could evolve into a mass incapacity to think long term, induced by the low probability of personal progress or building a career' (2011: 18). Information overload, along with difficulties of sorting useful information from the useless, is argued to lead to anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation. All of which shows that that despite the precariat being immersed in the bleeding edge of developments in work and its governance at the same time finds that these dynamics block it from developing a sense of agency in those very dynamics. This is what underlies Standing's argument that the precariat is in the front ranks 'but it has yet to find the Voice to bring its agenda to the fore' (*ibid*: vii) – and thus the question becomes what are the necessary conditions for the finding of this voice.

Like Bifo also Standing marks the emergence of the precariat in a context of politics after 1968, as defined by a rejection of industrial society and institutionally organized labour politics. He is aware of, and does to some degree engage with, more recent forms of political organizing focused on precarity, in particular Euro May Day. But Standing's engagement with them is somewhat varied and contradictory. At one level he wants to take these forms of formulating new political action seriously despite how they might seem to have little relevance to existing labour politics, noting for instance that their demands around free migration and basic income are far afield from traditional unionism. In this sense Standing's work very much acts as a bridge between worlds, trying to find common ground between different political perspectives that doubt the effectiveness or usefulness of other approaches. Despite this Standing still tends to have a somewhat sceptical attitude to these very movements, arguing that as a left libertarian political current they have 'yet to excite fear, or even interest, from those outside' and that most of the activities have been public displays of 'pride in precarious subjectivities' (*ibid*.: 3) rather than forms of concerted political action. They have been forms of protest which Standing rightly characterizes as 'anarchic and daredevilish' *rather* than 'strategic or socially threatening' (2011: 3), as if bravado and a daring theatrically oriented political imagination could not be part of a strategic orientation to politics. While this simultaneous desire to embrace these forms of protest politics and keep a distance might not make sense at first, ultimately it is core to Standing's approach. He wants to build upon the energies and importance he sees in a politics of precarity, but in the same way as these movements. This is why he regards a phenomenon such as Euro May Day as a precursor, bringing to light concerns that are quite important, but a precursor that needs to be superseded by being developed into a more mature

form of politics. Somewhat echoing the ideas of Eric Hobsbawm he describes the politics of precarity so far as the 'activities of primitive rebels preceding the emergence of collective action' and building upon that argues that 'now is the time for bodies that represent the precariat on a continuing basis to bargain with employers, with intermediaries such as brokers and with government agencies most of all' (*ibid.*: 167).

One might wonder why Standing argues there is such a need for developing new institutional or representational forms for the precariat. This argument is supported by his analysis of the dangers of what could happen if they were not to take place. Standing argues that the existing forms of institutional politics do not represent or speak to the interests of the precariat. The danger with this is that the existence of a growing population whose interests are not represented within the existing institutional political arrangements could easily find themselves rejecting those very institutions and seeking more radical alternatives that are not contained within these institutions. The precariat composes a population that Standing describes as 'floating, rudderless and potentially angry' and thus is 'capable of veering to the extreme right or extreme left politically and backing populist demagoguery that plays on their fears or phobias' (*ibid.*: 4). Standing's argument, in essence, is that unless a new form of labour politics or unionism is developed to address the concerns of the precariat there is a high likelihood that a sizeable portion of the precariat could embrace a radicalism of a strain, such as a reactionary populism, that would be best avoided[4]. In short, that unless 'mainstream parties offer the precariat an agenda of economic security and social mobility, a substantial part will continue to drift to the dangerous extreme' (*ibid.*: 151). While Standing rejects a narrative that frames the precariat as victim, he nonetheless insists that it *cannot resist* demagogic calls to neo-fascist politics and the further destruction of social welfare measures (*ibid.*: 153). That is, unless a new progressive politics formed around renewed social security measures and benefit programs such as basic income, coupled with new forms of flexible institutional politics, are developed.

There is much to be said for Standings' approach. It is one that is a solidly left liberal form of progressive politics that through taking precarity seriously manages to avoid seeing the precariat purely either as victims or as the new revolutionary subject. He makes some comments about areas that are quite suggestive but could use further elaboration, such as his relatively brief commentary on the shaping of precarity in China and the way that precarity is taking part in a redefining of our basic categories of experience such as time.

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4   Strangely enough he doesn't give nearly as much consideration to the idea that a left wing form of radicalism might be embraced as a result of growing precarity.

When he argues that as a counter-movement, 'the precariat needs mechanisms to generate deliberative democracy' (*ibid*.: 180), this seems like a sensible suggestion. It is not so far from what other left commentators have been calling for in different terms.

A 'politics of the multitude' or a call for 'exodus' likewise involves some consideration of new institutional forms, as well as developing rather the grammar of politics and networks. Standing is clearly not a Leninist, but the core of his project is in wanting to find the organizational and political form to move from an initial outburst of discontent among the precarious populations into something more durable, largely formed around demands for basic income. In short, it is a project of superseding these initial forms to develop this new 'politics of paradise' seemingly connected with a renewal of social movement unionism. Standing does not want to fall back on traditional unionism or welfare politics; he seems to know that the sell by date on them has passed. His is an approach that has learned much from anti-systemic movements, but he still wants a progressive strategy, albeit one that takes a new form. While the demand for basic income, and the call for deliberative democracy, might in some ways be quite sensible responses to what his analysis of the current situation suggest, they lack the imaginative flair and radicality to inspire continued struggles against and through precarity.

Precarious labour, precarious liberation

A common critique of the politics of precarity, as well as post-autonomist arguments more generally, is that they focus too much on the US and Europe, taking them as assumed background and framework. While this argument is debatable, in any case it is still a good sign to see such arguments explored outside of Europe. In *Precarious liberation* (2011), Franco Barchiesi examines the postcolonial politics of citizenship and work in South Africa. While discussions of precarity in Europe have tended to take the neoliberal turn in the 1980s as their backdrop, with its destruction of social welfare systems, discussing precarity in South Africa is complicated further by the connection and overlap between anti-apartheid struggles and the imposition of neoliberal austerity measures in their wake. It is the kind of conjuncture that often stymies political analysis, leading to questions of why 'revolutionary' governments, or even just left leaning ones, often end up implementing politics even more draconian then those of most ostensibly right wing regimes. Barchiesi is well placed to explore this conjuncture, examining how the tendency toward what the autonomist tradition refers to as 'real subsumption' serves to render even ostensibly progressive governance into an assemblage that serves capital accumulation.

The answer Barchiesi provides is more subtle and powerful than arguing that post-apartheid government sold out its deals or capitulated to the demands of the global economy (although both possess some degree of truth)[5]. Instead Barchiesi bases his argument on the importance and role that work has played in the political imagination in South Africa – from multiple angles – and also how the role and importance of work has been emptied out in the post-apartheid era. In short, Barchiesi examines what happens when work, after functioning as a central motif of virtue and national character, is fractured apart by the intensifying nature of precarious conditions. Precarity is examined here not just in the sense of labour, but as applied to the sense of national liberation struggles premised upon certain conceptions of labour as their foundation. This is where work functions as a guarantee of citizenship, national belonging, and forms the basis of the political imagination. But given the central role of work played, what happens when that falls away, or is undercut by growing precarisation?

Barchiesi provides a compelling account of the role that work played in anti-apartheid discourse, where the notion of the dignity of work played a key role. The national liberation struggle promised to restore work's promise of solidarity and self-realisation, as did independent trade unionism. Because of this the position of black waged workers was of greater importance, as they could be seen to embody a dialectical movement toward democratisation, national liberation, and economic modernisation in their struggles. But this emphasis on work in terms of symbolic and political investment, in particular in its connection with citizenship, in turn presents a number of key questions that structure the book:

> Has employment fulfilled its promise of emancipation and dignity in democratic South Africa? How did work relate to diverse visions of citizenship in the first post apartheid decades? How did government agencies, trade unions, and rank-and-file workers imagine such relationships? In what ways does the persistent precariousness of employment impact workers' identities, discourse, and collective solidarity? Is it still possible to think of labour as a progressive subject of social transformation? (2011: 4)

Barchiesi's answer is quite nuanced and complex, exploring the ways that an emphasis on work as subject of struggle and moral basis of the political imagination managed to take liberation struggles so far, but likewise managed to hold them back, and perhaps may even hobble their continued importance in the

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5   For instance, Barchiesi argues that the democratic transition has largely benefitted business more than the people it was supposed to free, with the ongoing economic crisis amplifying forms of precarity experience by large parts of the population. Given that, the neoliberal measures that are responsible for this seem all the more troubling precisely when framed in revolutionary and Marxist jargon, such as when members of parliament defend their housing policy as 'dialectical unity' of government subsidies and corporate finance (2011: 20).

present. If one's revolutionary politics is based around the value of work, it is perhaps not so surprising that as work itself becomes precarious the bases of those politics are themselves increasingly precarious.

At the most obvious level, basing liberation politics upon works tends to lead to the ignoring of political struggles that are not focused on work, or that occur outside or against it. In this way work becomes the only way to have a political voice. The status of precariousness, existing outside of long term formalised wage work, in this frame becomes a form of political speechlessness or exclusion from politics. During the 1980s the black labour movement was by far the most powerfully organized domestic force against apartheid, and thus it is not surprising that it would have the loudest voice. The problem with this, as Barchiesi suggests, is both that this 'consigned to irrelevance and invisibility workers' expressions not derived from occupational or political dynamics' and tended to lead to an analysis that was sometimes reductively productivist and glorifying of wage labour, not as a target of resistance, but as an 'immanent force of liberation and social empowerment' (*ibid.*: 21).

This becomes more perplexing when Barchiesi investigates the ways that the emphasis on work and its glorification was not found just within the political imagination of the ANC, the national liberation struggle, and trade unions, but also played a similar role in the apartheid racial state. Barchiesi uses this argument, that political perspectives that appear at face value to be diametrically opposed on some values, can nonetheless share common positions in ways that might not be obvious. And these shared positions, in particular the assigned moral and political value of work, can be used to explain how the course of the liberation struggle has played out in ways incomprehensible without taking into account this overlap in the political imagination. Barchiesi suggests that this helps explain why the struggle against apartheid could end in a negotiated transition rather than cathartic break or rupture. Similarly, he suggests that this common valuing of work poses problems for the post-apartheid political order, suggesting that it 'expose[s] a certain hollowness in the post apartheid project' (*ibid.*: 61) through the failure to develop an alternative approach to the relationship between labour, citizenship, and political community. The continued role of work in the political imagination shows just how deeply it is embedded and continues to shape the field of politics in South Africa.

In the period of the post-apartheid transition work has moved to underpinning a notion of citizenship and as the basis of political inclusion. While the abstract universality of the employment contract at face value is quite preferable to previous racialised categories of governance and political inclusion / exclusion, Barchiesi suggests that it is not so clear-cut:

to understand why the postapartheid liberation of labour turned out to be precarious and hollow a focus on employment conditions is of limited use. Rather, the precariousness of black workers' lives needs to be analysed as a social and existential reality... precariousness entails the contrast between the declining "centrality of the labour contract" in a social order where jobs are insecure ("precariousness of work") and the norms that keep work central for individuals and households affected by the retrenchment of public programs and the official praise of work over welfare ("precariousness of subsistence"). (*ibid*.: 9)

The nexus of work-citizenship can thus be understood as a technique of governance, as the normative criteria for producing subjects and marking the bounds of official discourse. Barchiesi suggests that with the 1994 elections 'the spirit of the worker was reborn in the body of the citizen' (*ibid*.: 63). Citizenship, as a de-racialised status, came to function as the most important realm of rights and responsibilities. Notions of democracy, citizenship, work, and production ended up becoming inseparably linked, providing a conceptual cluster that not only served to indicate the possibility of post-apartheid politics, but that could also serve to hold back and place limits on the desires of popular movements. The linking together of work with democracy and citizenship starts to become a problem precisely because of how the lived material experiences of work, marked by increasing levels of precarity, diverge too starkly from work's given glorification. Barchiesi suggests that precarity in South Africa today is not just a question of material insecurity, but also a precarity of the political imagination. This is particularly the case for those having not lived through the social struggles underpinned by this mythology (or theology) of labour, who find it hard to hold back a cynicism to this celebration of work: 'The idea of dignified wage labor sounded increasingly hollow and distant in daily survival struggles haphazardly patching together irregular jobs, social grants, and economies of smuggling and counterfeiting' (*ibid*.: 80).

Barchiesi's approach, similar to Standing's, is to consider precarity not just as a question of the workplace or of particular workplaces, but rather as a fundamental transformation of the wage relationship itself and the way the wage relationship is embedded within a larger social fabric. Precarity then is not just then part of reshaping particular employment contracts but rather is an integral part of transforming the social contract more broadly. The spreading of precarity as a condition is part of a broader intensification of labour, as those whose conditions are rendered more unstable are induced into taking on self-entrepreneurial strategies, constantly trying to upgrade their skills, abilities, contacts, and so forth, while attempting to secure some modicum of existence for themselves. While this may be more readily obvious in the coping strategies of migrant workers and communities who end up juggling expectations (as well as possibly forms of employment) to support themselves, it is a shift that marks the

way we interact more broadly, from education to health care. In this framing all actions become thought of as individual investment decisions, for which one be called to account for, rather than as collective social arrangements. In this sense precarity is not simply a transformation of wage relationship, but nearly the death of the social itself, insofar as the social is something more than what can be subordinated to economic interactions.

Barchiesi suggests that these varied coping skills and ways of living developed by precarious workers are of immense value, and are most often indirectly appropriated by employers who do not have to provide compensation for them, as they occur outside of understood working hours. This is why analyses too narrowly centred on production are questionable in how they run the risk of essentialising and naturalising the primary location where workers express and enact their desires. Barchiesi questions these assumptions, which he sees as being held both by the social sciences and labour organizers, to ask whether the workplace is actually so central to the formation of workers' subjectivities. What if workers' strategies are not oriented to transforming the workplace but rather to escaping from it? This is an important question because Barchiesi does not argue that the previous over-focus on the bounded workplace should lead to disregarding it in favour of another area of analysis (for instance looking at the ways subjectivity is produced through consumer behaviour) as replacement for a labour politics. Rather Barchiesi is arguing for a form of approaching labour politics that is much broader than the workplace, as a politics of living labour more generally and not the bounded forms of work it is embodied in.

This is critical precisely because of the ways that work and its meaning are much more variable for South African workers, never really conforming to the discourse praising its glories and value. This is especially the case for black workers, both before the fall of apartheid and after, who tended to experience work as amplifying precarity rather than as a bulwark against it. While arguably there has long existed a juncture between this stated glorification of work and its lived realities, this disjuncture has become more readily apparent since the fall of apartheid, revealing what Barchiesi describes as 'the spectre of insecurity, the powerlessness of union organizing – that underlie the incommensurability between the official glorification of work and its experienced realities' (*ibid.*: 25). It is this gulf between the proclaimed status of work and its reality that helped to fuel workers' desire to escape from work through ideals of self-employment, or led them into what Barchiesi describes as an emerging 'politics of labour melancholia' where discontent with conditions of work inadvertently feeds into a desire for restoring order secured by authority granted by the status of work.

In this way Barchiesi comes to a position close to Standing's about the political risks posed by precarity in so far as it undermines the role of work in the political imagination. The increasing level of insecurity makes it clear that the ideological role of work can no longer function in the same way. Barchisi suggests that chauvinist attitudes and a regressive attachment to fixed forms of identity can step in to fill the symbolic space left by the decline of work as the central ideological fulcrum. Or perhaps more accurately not the decline of work in this role, but rather when the disjunction between the ideology of work and its reality are so wide as to not hold together. Barchiesi suggests that the politics of workers' melancholia is formed by a continuing attachment to work where the workers perceive the meaningless of wage labour 'as a bitter betrayal of emancipatory projects once vested in the labour market' (*ibid.*: 255). But this is not used to argue for an abandoning of labour politics, or the drive for emancipation, but rather for ditching the limited view of a labour politics focused solely on the workplace. Barchiesi argues for ditching employment-based notions of liberation, instead placing 'the precariousness of employment, rather than its idealized celebration, at the core of a new grammar of politics' (*ibid.*: 247).

This brings us to what is perhaps the sharpest difference in the positions taken by Barchiesi and Standing, namely their quite divergent perspectives on the question of basic income. Barchiesi is in some ways broadly sympathetic to the arguments for basic income, for instance noting that it would serve to compensate value-creating activities outside the bounds of the wage relation and thus could serve to diminish the compulsion to work for survival. Basic income could thus fill a useful role in reducing the weight of the workplace in peoples' activities and lives, thus opening possibilities for ways of living and political imaginaries not so bound by the necessity of work. But while he might seem sympathetic at that level, Barchiesi is quite critical of the position that basic income could be understood as a political solution to the question of precarity. This is in part because of how he argues that basic income can serve to maintain the centrality of work in the imagination of citizenship. Basic income becomes a way to transform work into a realm of self-actualisation rather than an activity undertaken out of compulsion. While this represents a move away from a development over previous ideas, the problem for Barchiesi is how basic income can serve to 'salvage the connection between wage labour, rights, and human dignity whereas active labour market policies are at risk of merely forcing people into low-wage jobs' (*ibid.*: 124). Barchiesi argues that such a conception of basic income provides not an alternative to precarious labour but rather an inducement to it by providing protection against the more egregious effects of the precarisation of work. Barchiesi rejects this conception of basic income in his displacement of a limited conception of work in the political imagination. Rather than redeeming the value of labour Barchiesi suggests that basic income is

valuable as a critique of wage labour, not as a new form of policy intervention to ameliorate its excesses.

Ultimately what Barchiesi argues is that precarity is important not just for understanding the shaping of particular forms of labour, or of the security of conditions, but as applied to the ongoing stability of the national liberation project. This is South Africa's precarious liberation, marked by the strange situation where political antagonisms were played out by competing forces that 'have often held similar fantasies of order and normality' (*ibid.*: 93) where the official imagination of post-apartheid politics has delegated these fantasies to the nexus of work and citizenship. In one of the interviews Barchiesi conducted for writing the book a waste worker draws on an image that resonates deeply with those used in the autonomist tradition: the waste worker describes democratisation as a liberating exodus, but one that has been halted by the precariousness of work. This worker describes how the 1994 election was a moment when they thought they were leaving Egypt, to find a better life not under tyranny, but that today they are still suffering. For this worker the fall of apartheid was 'like coming from Egypt and now we are going back to Egypt. The old government was Egypt and we thought we were going to Canaan, but instead with this new [waste] utility we are going back to Egypt' (*ibid.*: 190).

The fragility of any institutionalised liberation project is perhaps a bit fragile, and risks that the gains secured in the exodus are turned into the exact opposite of the freedom that was sought. It is perfectly clear that the exodus from apartheid was indeed a liberating process. But the problem is that while rejecting 'going back to Egypt' is clear enough, this leaves undefined what to do. Barchiesi's central argument is that it is impossible to even begin to answer the question of what is to be done as long as the centrality of work, now displaced to the citizen, in the political imagination is maintained, as this is a position that has become untenable today, although it could equally be argued that it has always been untenable and that this has only become more recently apparent. Barchiesi takes the long-standing autonomist theme of the refusal of work and expands it, not just as a practice, but also as a central political motif and perspective, one that puts precarity at the centre of a new grammar of politics.

Ambivalence and/of transversal compositions

> The emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity. (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008: 53)

The two versions of approaching precarity discussed here are in many ways quite similar, although also having important points of contrast. They agree that a focus on only the wage workplace leaves large populations out of the frame, and that this has quite negative political effects. They both share a concern with the rise of political currents who step in to fill the void left by the decline of a certain conception of labour in the political imagination, and that this could risk a sharp turn to the right and to forms of neo-fascism. Despite this level of agreement there are profound levels of disagreement, for instance on the question of basic income, and more fundamentally whether precarity is a political category to be incorporated into a renewed form of institutional politics, or one that requires a drastic critiquing and rethinking of the concepts used for thinking about politics and the position of work.

Perhaps rather than asking the question of what precarity is it is more useful to ask what precarity does, which is to say, what does precarity add to political analysis and strategy? This is a useful perspective precisely because it points to the reality that precarity is not one thing, but rather a versatile concept that has been deployed differently in varying situations and contexts. To compare the few examples discussed thus far, first we looked at precarity as a way to frame the desires of young workers in 1970s Italy to escape the factory and the constraints of regular wage labour: precarity as something beautiful and worth celebrating. In this framing precarity is the common ground of those who reject the Fordist compromise for a different conception of politics, life, and labour. By the time the concept reappears in the discourse of movements arising in the wake of the anti-globalisation movement, precarity is understood far differently, not as something to be celebrated but as a conceptual framework for theorising the shared ravages of neoliberalism across varying position of status, and income. Precarity is used to find a common ground for the positions of migrant workers and freelancers, with all problems that go along with such a proposition. Standing takes up precarity as a way to refocus labour politics upon populations ignored by only focusing on wage labour and unions, and to bring those stuck in more precarious positions into a common political project. Standing seeks to draw upon the energies of 'primitive rebellion' to rebuild a new institutional context for politics. Finally, Barchiesi rethinks the question of precarity within the context and complexity of the politics of national liberation in South Africa, in particular how they are rooted in a conception of work undercut by the growing precarisation of work. While each of these perspectives has its value, I'd suggest that Barchiesi's work is the most profound, precisely because it tries to employ precarity not as a category to be applied, but rather as a moment of instability within the radical political imagination that is as much promise as threat. The precariat might indeed be the new dangerous class, but that could very well be part of its political potential rather being a danger. In each of these cases what we

see is the tension between precarity as a sociological and as a strategic and political concept.

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter in their (2008) analysis provide a very useful insight into the politics of precarity and the ambivalence existing within precarity as political focus and analytic category. They declare the last thing they want to do is to 'sociologise precarity', to render into a concept that can be applied to map out the changing nature of class. In short, they are arguing against the use of precarity as a concept in the way that Standing seeks to develop it as concept, one that assess the current shape of labour and develop a new politics around this class formation. That is not to totally reject empirical approaches, which Neilson and Rossiter agree can be of assistance in identifying different types and experiences of precarity. But they argue that while this work can be a prelude to political organization, it is in itself not enough to generate a political intervention adequate to the challenges of the current situation. Rather than precarity as a concept to be applied, Neilson and Rossiter argue for a conception of precarity that cannot be grounded. For them precarity is not an empirical object but rather an experience, one that is best investigated through a 'transpositional movement between the theoretical and the practical' – a transversal movement that is never stable (2008: 63).

This in part explains why Neilson and Rossiter comment that the decline of precarity as a political focus connects to its rise as an academic area of investigation. It is not simply a comment on how academic work lags woefully years behind the pace of political developments and thus can only serve to pick up the pieces of social movement developments after they have subsided (although there is something to be said for that). Rather it is that the approaches employed in investigating precarity have entirely different ways of working. Or to express it in their framing, the investigation of precarity as a sociological phenomenon wants to fix it as a category that can be used for empirical work. While this fixing of the category, the agreement over what the concept is, can seem entirely reasonable on a certain level, this represents a kind of blocking of the transversal and transpositional moment that they argue is what was valuable in precarity as a political concept. Neilson and Rossiter suggest that precarity still has a critical potential, albeit one that is limited, but a potential that can be realised more by rejecting sociological framings and expectations of analytical and descriptive consistency.

It is in this sense that it is most useful to rethink precarity by connecting it back more closely to the autonomist tradition. That's not to say that there is some 'purer essence' of the concept that is employed by political actors and not by academic writers. That would be to re-install a kind of essentialist theory-praxis

divide in political analysis. Rather, what can be seen in the concept of precarity is a kind of tension between analysis and politics that has long existed in the middle of autonomist politics. One can see this in the tradition's key concepts, such as the paired notions of technical and political composition. The former is used to understand the current composition of capital and workings of the economy including technical skills, knowledge, level of scientific development, and so forth. The latter is the existing political energies and capacities of the working class, or as the notion has been expanded even more broadly, the capacities of political actors in revolt, to transform the world around then. The autonomist tradition is marked heavily by a radical subjectivism that rejects narratives privileging capital's perspective in explaining and understanding social and economic crisis and transformation[6]. Perhaps the most important element of the autonomist tradition is to emphasise this radical subjective becoming of political composition over the more traditionally political economic analysis of technical composition – and to privilege it as the basis of analysis and political strategy. But this very privileging of political composition and subjectivity brings along its own difficulties. If applied in a dogmatic and extreme fashion such an approach can lead to grand declarations about new forms of emerging subjectivities and political energies that lack a sufficient connection to the conditions around them. It can become almost a form of prophecy and declaration, unmoored from the composition of the social.

It is this ongoing tension between technical and political composition that is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the autonomist concepts, but also their weakness. This is why the multiple meanings and roles of precarity, what it does as a concept, is not a problem of its lack of coherence, but rather an expression of its value. The meaning of precarity is not determined by a set of criteria that define it, and thus can be operationalised as tools of research (or at least solely as them). Rather it is a political tool whose meaning is shaped by the context from

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6   A recent article by Bar-Yuchnei (2011) in the journal Endnotes makes a critique of this core autonomist notion, suggesting that in current 'conditions of austerity' the capacity of class antagonism to act as a motor of social and economic transformation has reached its end. This, however, is not framed as an argument to return to an analysis based upon analyzing 'tendencies to crisis' or other more economistic frames. Rather it seems to indicate that this emphasis on political composition as subjective becoming has reached something of a dead end. Bifo has made similar arguments. Perhaps it is the further incorporation of subjectivation as factor of production in flexible, creativity oriented economy that precludes it operating in the same role it did before. But it would seem that if subjectivity is more essential to the workings of the economy and class structure that its incorporation, its dynamic of decomposition, would serve as a basis for a new form of political recomposition. This remains to be seen.

which it emerges, the composition of labour and politics in which it is utilised. Precarity is thus beautiful, an escape from the factory, and horrible, in the conditions of intensifying neoliberal globalisation and destruction of social welfare programs. It is like Walt Whitman, large, containing multitudes, and possibly contained by multitudes. Precarity is most useful not as a concept for mapping out new class categories for integrating them into a new institutional politics, but as a tool for intervening in the shaping of new struggles. Precarity is not just a question of the changing composition of labour, but of experimenting with modes of being and community that are not determined by labour. The task then for the politics of precarity today is not to refine it as a sociological concept to be applied in research but to renew it as a compositional project for the development of new forms of autonomy.

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